

interzone/60

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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

JUNE
1992

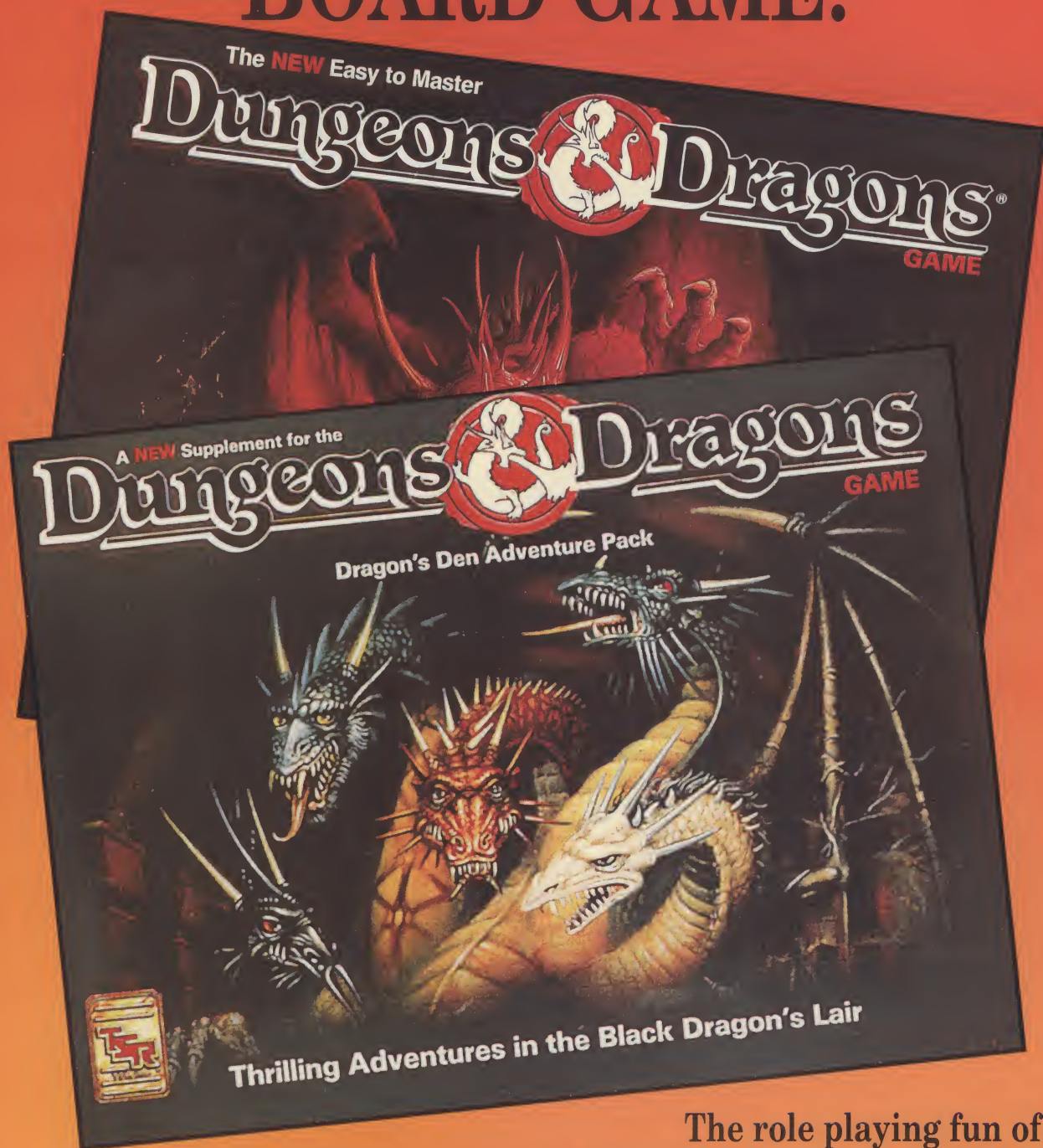
Fantasy Issue:
Stephen Baxter
Garry Kilworth
Geoff Landis
& others



Interviews:
Robert Asprin
Terry Brooks
Stephen Donaldson



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interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 60

June 1992

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Interface

David Pringle

It's a fantasy issue this time around. Some of you may recall what I said in the editorial of issue 53: "by and large we do not see *Interzone* as a fantasy magazine in the sense that the book market now defines the term. Although there are large overlaps, fantasy is very much a genre in its own right these days. We would like to produce a sister magazine which concentrates on that type of fiction, and perhaps one day soon we shall."

In the present economic climate a new sister magazine for *IZ* is out of the question. Nor are we planning any change in the "normal" mix of *IZ*, which is and will remain principally a science-fiction magazine. Of course, there will always be space here for what I described in the *IZ* 53 editorial as "the weird, the outré, the offbeat, the indefinable, in addition to science-fiction stories hard or soft."

However, we've had many letters from readers who want more pure fantasy, which makes us think that there may be a larger market for that kind of fiction than there is for sf, and hence that a fantasy magazine might one day be feasible in this country. We'd be interested to know your responses to the fiction (and the interviews) in this issue: is there a real demand for short fantasy fiction, and in particular for light, upbeat material of a fantasy sort? Please tell us what you think.

Actually, at least two of the stories in this issue have sf denouements. They may have the ingredients of fantasy, with unicorns, gnomes and all, but they turn into science fiction before long; so sf readers should read on...

The Accountant, the Lawyer and the Missionary's Son

Thanks to the hard-working **Stan Nicholls**, we also have three short interviews with leading American fantasy authors herein: an accountant, a lawyer and a missionary's son. If there were to be a new fantasy magazine, it would certainly run interviews with writers of this type – and Messrs Donaldson, Brooks and Asprin are among the biggest-selling novelists of any kind these days. Alas, they all happen to be men, as are the five writers who have stories in this issue. In an attempt to redress the gender balance slightly, I've added a little piece on the position of women in fantasy.

Comments on this, and on the whole

topic of fantasy vis-à-vis science fiction, are welcomed from readers. Bear in mind we are not talking here about horror fiction, which certainly overlaps with fantasy (and with sf) to a large degree, but which has also become demarcated as a separate genre in the minds of publishers, booksellers, reviewers and many readers and writers. Horror has, or has had, its own magazines and anthologies, from the late-but-possibly-to-be-revived *Fear* to the confusingly-titled *Fantasy Tales*. No, we mean "pure" fantasy: that commercial category of fiction which was born about a quarter of a century ago from a fusion of Tolkienian High Fantasy and Howardian Sword-and-Sorcery (with many other ingredients thrown in, not least elements of the literary Fairy Tale from Perrault to Andersen, and of the humorous fantastic tradition which began with the novels of F. Anstey and Thorne Smith).

So, how about it? Do you think a fantasy magazine would work in this country? If so, what kinds of fiction and non-fiction should it contain? Stories like the ones in this issue of *IZ*, or something else altogether? Send us your opinions, and, who knows, between us we may get something going.

Interzone Poll Results, 1991

Last issue we gave the winners in the *IZ* fiction popularity poll – **Greg Egan** came first, with **Molly Brown** second and **Ian R. MacLeod** third. We also reported that we had received 84 valid ballots from readers and that we'd be giving the rest of the results, for *IZ*'s artwork and non-fiction for 1991, in this issue. Here they are, beginning with the cover art for issues 43-54 inclusive. As usual, all negative votes have been subtracted from positive votes to arrive at the final scores shown:

Cover Art:

1)	Geoff Taylor (#45, "The Bone Forest")	31
2)	Mark Harrison (#48, <i>Dreamlands</i> cover)	23
3)	Oscar Chichoni (#43, <i>SF: 100 Best Novels</i>)	21
4)	SMS (#54, "What Continues, What Fails")	17
5=)	Helter Skelter (#50, untitled)	13
5=)	Chris Moore (#44, <i>IZ: The 5th Anthology</i>)	8
7=)	SMS (#52, untitled – girl on bike)	1
7=)	Simon Watkins (#46, untitled collage)	1

9)	Paul Chadwick (#47, "Darkness Upon the Face...")	0
10)	Tim White (#49, untitled)	-2
11)	Josh Kirby (#51, <i>MILLION</i> crossover cover)	-8
12)	Macdonald & Co. (#53, Brosnan advert)	-11

Interior Art:

1)	Martin McKenna	34
2)	Iain Byers	28
3)	Kevin Cullen	24
4)	SMS	20
5)	Jason Hurst	14
6)	Bob Eggleton	11
7)	Robert Pasternak	10
8)	Carol Heyer	9
9)	Paul Chadwick	6
10)	Barbara Hills	4
11)	Sylvia Starshine	3
12=)	Larry Blamire	2
12=)	David Cherry	2
12=)	Ben Mozar	2
15)	Tony Hough	-3
16=)	Mike Hawthorne	-7
16=)	Steve Hambidge	-7
18)	Martin Perrott	-9
19=)	Mike Hadley	-13
19=)	Helter Skelter	-13

Our congratulations to **Geoff Taylor** and **Martin McKenna** for winning the beauty contest among the artists. It's interesting to note that most of the *Aboriginal SF* artists – Eggleton, Pasternak, Heyer, Chadwick, Blamire and Cherry (whose work featured in colour in issue 47) – scored reasonably well with our readers. Also, it doesn't surprise us that the interior artwork by "Helter Skelter" (the design house which handled our issues 49 and 50) fared badly – apart from the abstract cover they put on number 50, which was generally liked.

Non-Fiction:

1)	Bruce Sterling comment columns	38
2)	Nick Lowe film reviews	28
3)	SF Editors' interview part 2 (Nicholls)	24
4)	Book reviews in general	22
5)	Cyberpunk Checklist (Kadrey & McCaffery)	21
6)	Wendy Bradley TV reviews	13
7=)	"Interaction" (readers' letters)	13
7=)	Ursula Le Guin interview (Greenland)	13
7=)	Howard Waldrop interview (Feeley)	13
10)	Jonathan Carroll interview (Hughes)	12
11=)	J.G. Ballard interview (Kadrey & Pringle)	11
11=)	Wendy Bradley book reviews	11
13=)	Robert Rankin interview (Munro)	10
13=)	"Interface" (editorial)	10

15=)	John Clute book reviews	9
15=)	Gardner Dozois interview (Nicholls)	9
15=)	Terry Pratchett interview (Wignall)	9
15=)	Simon Ings comment columns	9
15=)	Interviews in general	9
15=)	Rachel Pollack interview (Greenland)	9
21=)	John Brosnan on <i>The Primal Screen</i>	8
21=)	Robert Metzger (science, Aboriginal issue)	8
21=)	James Morrow interview (Feeley)	8
21=)	David Pringle on 100 Scientific Romances	8
25=)	David V. Barrett "Workshops" article	7
25=)	"Books Received"	7
25=)	Robert Holdstock interview (Nicholls)	7
28=)	Ray Bradbury interview (Nicholls)	6
28=)	Small-Press Round-Up (Kenworthy)	6
28=)	Paul McAuley book reviews	6
28=)	Anne Rice interview (Ramsland)	6
32=)	Mary Gentle book reviews	5
32=)	Joe Haldeman interview (Nicholls)	5
32=)	David Langford comment columns	5
35=)	The <i>Interzone</i> index, issues 1-50	4
35=)	Robert Silverberg interview (Nicholls)	4
35=)	Brian Stableford on SF in China	4
35=)	David Wingrove interview (Nicholls)	4

Our congratulations to **Bruce Sterling** on topping this section of the poll again. All the remaining non-fiction items scored three points or less. We also introduced a new question in this year's poll; namely, which sf and fantasy stories in other UK magazines or anthologies for 1991 were particularly liked? Many readers said that they had not seen enough material outside the pages of *IZ* and declined to vote for anything in this category. However, 28 people did nominate stories from elsewhere, and the results are as follows:

Non-*Interzone* UK SF & Fantasy Stories:

1=)	Richard Kadrey: Notes for Luchenko's Symphony (BBR 18)	6
2=)	Eric Brown: The Phoenix Experiment (<i>The Lyre</i> 1)	5
2=)	Misha: Chippoke Na Gomi (BBR 19)	5
4=)	C.N. Gilmore: The Miracle Worker (<i>The Lyre</i> 1)	4
4=)	Kim Newman: Uberrnensch! (<i>New Worlds</i> 1)	4
6=)	Chris Amies: Zero Summer (<i>Auguries</i>)	3
6=)	Eric Brown: Star of Epsilon (REM 1)	3
6=)	Michael Cobley: Marble-eye in Midnight Black (REM 1)	3
6=)	Paul Di Filippo: Any Major Dude (<i>New Worlds</i> 1)	3
6=)	Alan Garside: For as Long as I Live (BBR 19)	3
6=)	P.F. Hamilton: Sonnie's Edge (<i>New Moon</i> 1)	3
6=)	Mike O'Driscoll: Theme from Shaft (BBR 18)	3

Congratulations to winner **Richard Kadrey** and small-press magazine *BBR* (edited by **Chris Reed**). A number of stories gained two votes, including items by Michael Cobley, John Duffield, Maggie Freeman, Colin Greenland, J.D. Gresham, Richard Hammersley, Mark Haw, Simon Ings, Ian McDonald, Stephen Markley, Michael Moorcock, Diana Reed and Jay Summers, from *The Unusual Genitals Party*, *Dream*, *Far Point*, *Temps*, *New Worlds*, *REM* and (again) *BBR*.

SF Foundation in Trouble

The Science Fiction Foundation, which since 1972 has published the journal *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction*, is in difficulties. Although the current editor of the journal, **Edward James**, works at York University, the SFF has always been housed at the Polytechnic of East London (formerly North East London Poly). Over the course of 20 years it has amassed the biggest and best collection of sf books, magazines and critical works which is publicly available anywhere in the UK or, possibly, in Europe. Now the Polytechnic has decided to pull the plug, and has given the Foundation one year in which to find new premises or to wind up its business.

Originally, it was the intention that the SFF would benefit the Polytechnic by becoming a centre for the teaching of science fiction (and a resource for related topics such as science-in-society or sociology-of-literature courses). During its first decade, when it was staffed by such academically qualified individuals as **Peter Nicholls** and **Malcolm Edwards**, the SFF did indeed participate in a certain amount of teaching and academic research. Since 1980, however, the post of Administrator of the Foundation has been frozen for financial reasons. The SFF has been staffed by one part-time secretary, **Joyce Day**, and perforce its contribution to the Polytechnic's academic activities has been slight. Nevertheless, it has added a certain lustre to that grey institution, at least in the eyes of sf fans around the world.

So the Foundation is looking for new premises for its valuable collection and journal, preferably in London. (I have visions of a sort of "Science Fiction Club," a building, or even a house, not too far from the West End, with a superb sf reference library, lending library, information service, meeting rooms, video room, coffee bar, magazine stall where you can buy *Foundation*, *Interzone* and all other sf-related titles...; does anyone know a millionaire who might want to fund such a dream?) In the meantime, the support organization known as Friends of the Foundation is appealing for ideas, funds and voluntary labour. If you are

interested in helping in any way, or simply in finding out more about the SFF, you should contact **Roger Robinson**, 75 Rosslyn Avenue, Harold Wood, Essex RM3 0RG (tel. 0708-342304).

(David Pringle)

Interaction

Dear Editors:

My congratulations on your tenth anniversary issue, and my thanks for your mention of my own small contribution.

The numerate among your readership will have noticed that you mentioned eight founding co-editors, and listed seven of them; by some unfortunate oversight, Colin Greenland's name seems to have slipped out of the list. It might also be appropriate to mention Ian Miller's sterling work as Art Editor, Philippa Bramson and Abigail Frost's long-lived and excellent contributions as designers and Lin Morris' brief period as part of the editorial collective. The History of Science Fiction is True and Terrible enough, without credit's being omitted where credit is due.

Roz Kaveney
London

Editor: Oops. Apologies for omitting Colin Greenland's name from the list of eight original editors – an accident, I assure you. The others deserve credit too, especially Ian Miller, who was not only Art Editor for a while but who still contributes illustrations from time to time (see the stories by Ballard, Harrison and McMullen in our last two issues).

Dear Editors:

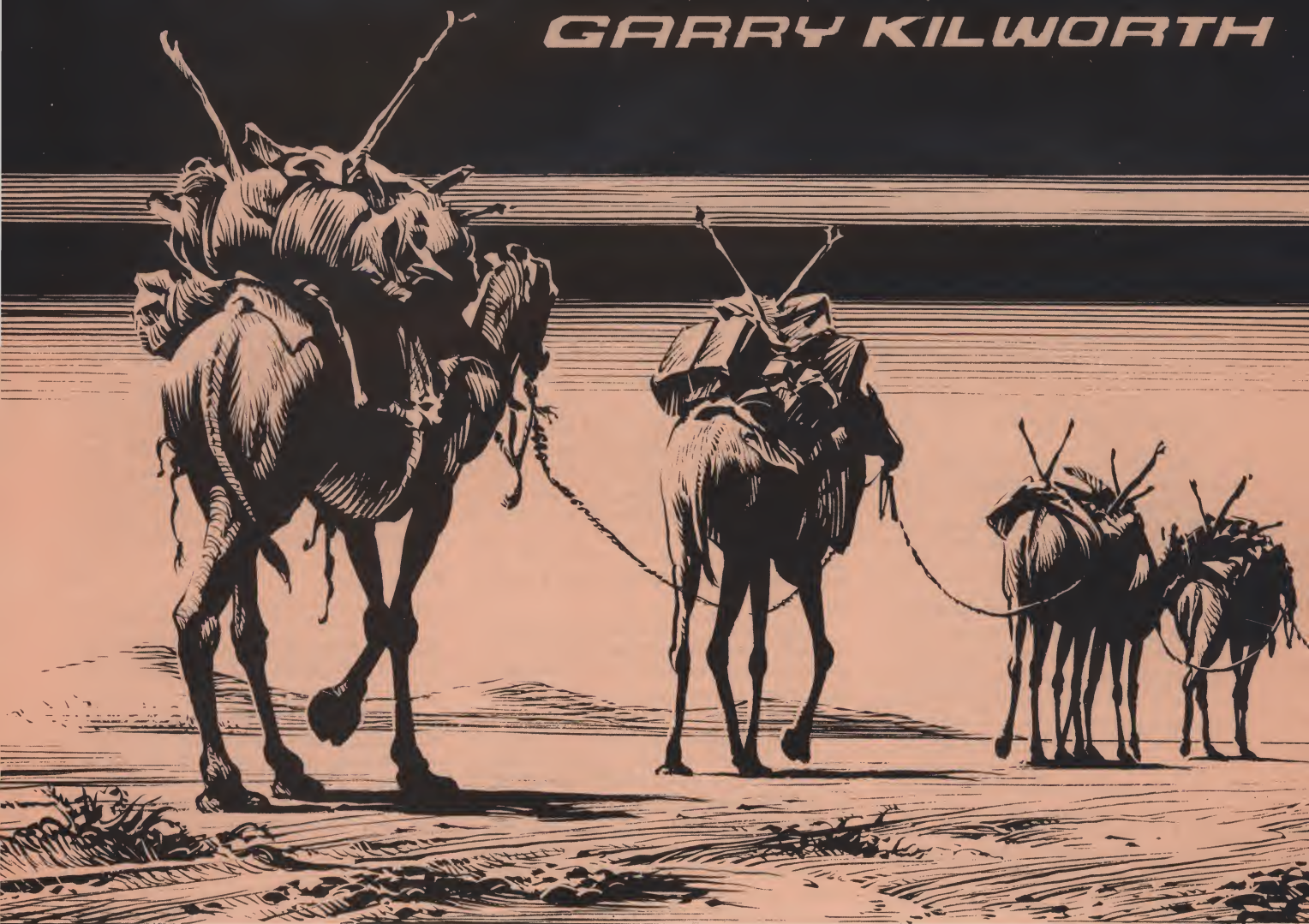
I'm somewhat puzzled by your reply to Gintaras Aleksonis in *Interzone* 58 – not by what you say, but by what you don't say. This is the second occasion in the past three issues on which you've urged readers to send material to their fellow fans in the former Soviet bloc, but without once mentioning the work already done in this area by Fans Across the World. I can't believe that you haven't heard of this organization; have you omitted it because you perhaps conceive of it as a fan fund similar to TAFF and GUFF?

If so, you'd be wrong. Fans Across the World was initially established to bring people from the former Soviet bloc to the British Worldcon in 1987 (and later helped bring people to the Holland Worldcon in 1990 as well), but following the end of the Cold War has grown into a Europe-wide organization which fosters contact at all levels. Anyone wishing to send books

Continued on page 22

The Sculptor

GARRY KILWORTH



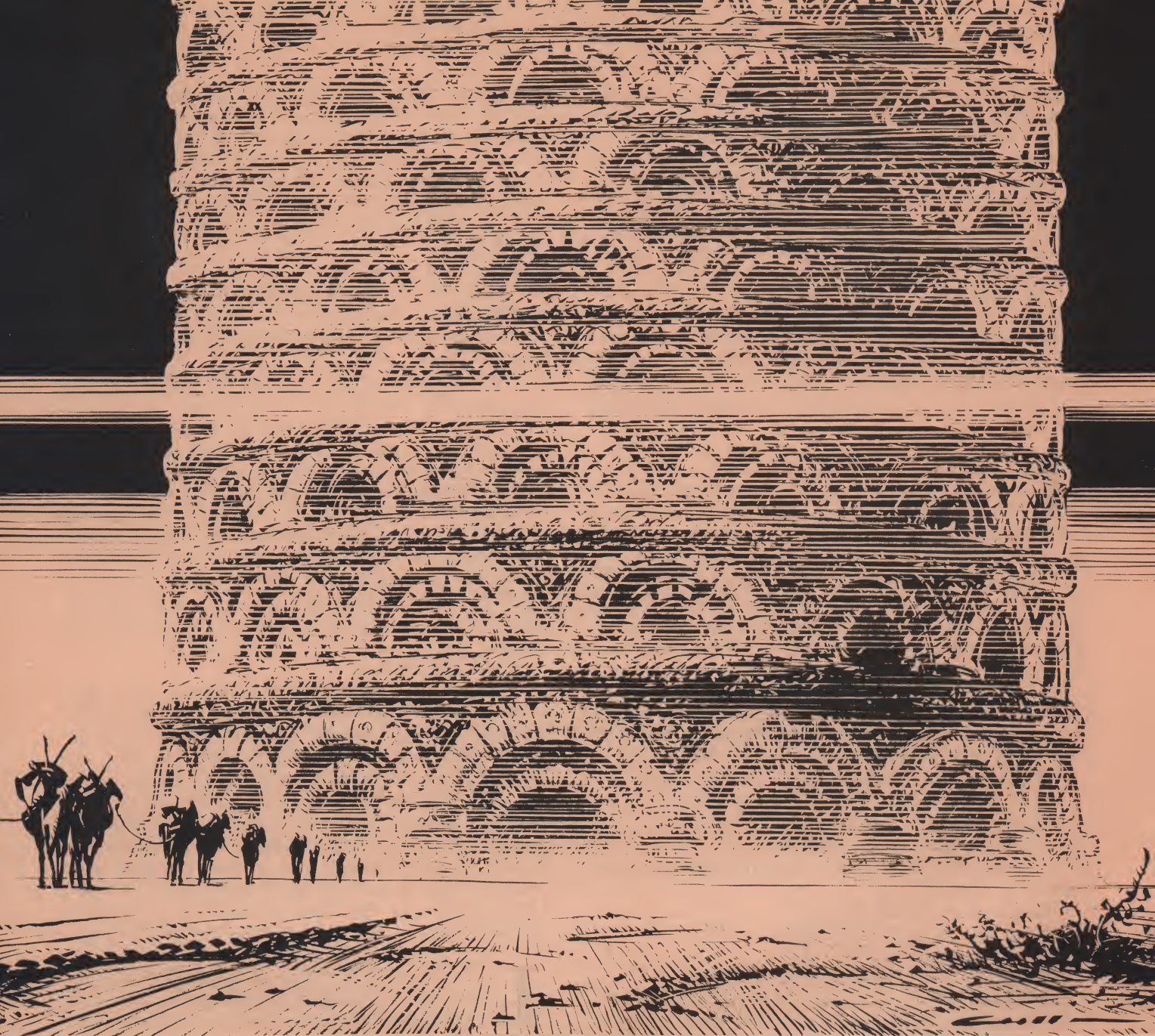
Niccolò reached the pale of the Great Desert at noon on the third day. He dismounted and led his horse and seventeen pack camels towards the last water he would see for six weeks. There at the river's edge they drank. Some would have said that so many camels was an expensive luxury, but Niccolò knew the value of too many over too few. Only eight of them were carrying the statuettes. Of the remaining camels, two were loaded with his and his mount's personal supplies, three were carrying water, and three were loaded with fodder to feed the other camels. The last camel was packing fodder for the fodder-carriers but not for itself. It was possible that this camel, or one of the others, would die of starvation before he reached the Tower.

Niccolò had had to call a halt at seventeen. When he had consulted the sage, Cicaro, the old man had recommended that to ensure survival he take an endless string of camels with him. Distance, food-chains, energy levels, temperatures, humidities, moisture loss – when all the relevant information had been given to Cicaro, and the calculations made, the result

was camels stretching into infinity. Impossibilities were not the concern of the sage. He merely applied his mathematics to the problem and gave you the answer.

At least they were flesh and blood. Towards the end of the journey Niccolò could begin eating them, if it became necessary. At that moment he found the thought distasteful, though he was no sentimentalist, and had refrained from even naming his horse. Niccolò knew, however, that when it came to the choice between starvation or butchering one of the beasts, whatever he promised himself now, he would use the knife without hesitation. He had eaten worms, even filled his stomach with dirt, when he had been without food. Man is a wretched creature when brought to the level of death. When he has shed his scruples he will eat his own brother, let alone a horse or a camel.

Yet there was a mystery there. Man also perplexes himself, Niccolò thought, as he filled his canteens from the river. When he and Arturo had almost run out of water in this very desert, they had fought like



dogs for the last few mouthfuls, would have killed each other for them. Then rescue had come, at the last moment, preventing murder.

Yet, not two months afterwards, Arturo ironically committed suicide, hung himself in the back room of a way station, for love of a whore.

Why does a man fight tooth and nail to live one day, and kill himself the next? It was as if life was both precious and useless, not at the same time, but in different contexts. Life changed its values according to emotional colours. In the desert, dying of thirst, Arturo had only one thought in mind – to live. It had been a desperate, savage thought, instinctive.

Yet that instinct had vanished when Arturo had climbed on that ale barrel and tied a window sash around his neck. Why hadn't it sprung out from that place in which it was lurking, waiting to perform, to kill for life? Perhaps it is hopelessness that kills the instinct in its lair? In the desert, if he fought hard and callously enough, the water might eventually belong to him. The love of the lady though, no matter how savagely he battled, could never be his. If she with-

held it, could not feel such for him, then he was helpless, because he could never in a million years wrench love from her grasp like a water bottle.

A craft came along the river, silently, the helmsman apparently happy for the most part to let it follow the current. The cargo was sheltered from the sun by a palmleaf-thatched cabin, which covered the deck with an arch-shaped tunnel. The sail was down, unnecessary, even a hindrance in the fast flow.

As the boat went by, Niccolò was able to peer inside, through a window-hole in the thatch. A giant of a man sat in the dimness within: a clumsy-looking fellow, appearing too big for his craft, but a man with peace, contentment, captured in his huge form. He was knitting. His great hands working the wooden needles while his elbow occasionally twitched the tiller, as if he could steer sightlessly.

It seemed he knew the river so well – the meanders, the currents, the sandbars and rapids – had travelled this long watery snake for half a century – he needed no eyes. Maybe he could feel the flow and know to a nautical inch, a fraction of a fathom, where he was in

time and space? Perhaps he navigated as he knitted woollen garments, both by feel, on his way to the sea.

Niccolò signalled to the man, and received a reply.

Afterwards he made camp by the river that wound beneath the star patterns visible in the clear sky. The campfire sent up showers of sparks, like wandering stars themselves, and though Niccolò did not know it they gave someone hope. A lost soul was out there, in the desert, and saw the glow in the heavens.

The following morning, Niccolò woke to the sound of camels grumbling, kicking their hobbled legs, shaking their traces. The horse took no part in this minor rebellion. A nobler creature (in its own mind), it held itself aloof from dissident camels. Niccolò fed the camels, then he and the horse ate together, apart from the other beasts.

Three days out into the desert, Niccolò came across the woman. Her lips were blistered and he had trouble forcing water past them. When she opened her eyes she said, "I knew you would come. I saw your fire," then she passed out again.

In the evening he revived her with some warm jasmine tea, and soon she was able to sit up, talk. She was not a particularly pretty woman. At a guess she was about the same age as he was, in her very early thirties. Her skin had been dried by the sun, was the colour of old paper, and though it was soft had a myriad of tiny wrinkles especially around the eyes and mouth. Her stature was slight: she could have been made of dry reeds. She wore only a thin cotton dress.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked her.

"Looking for water," she said, sipping the tea, staring at him over the rim of the mug.

He gestured irritably.

"I can see that, but how did you get lost? Were you part of a caravan?"

She shook her head, slowly.

"I was searching for my mother's house."

"Here, in the desert?"

Her brown eyes were soft in the firelight.

"It wasn't always a desert," she said. "I thought there might be something left – a few bricks, stones, something."

Niccolò nodded. He guessed she was one of those who went out searching for their roots. Lost now, but lost before she even came into the desert. One of those who had been separated as a child from her family during the exodus, and had found out her father's name, where her parents had lived, and had gone looking to see if there was anything left.

He stared around him, his eyes sweeping over the low and level plain. Only a short three decades ago there had been a thriving community here, the suburbs of a city. On the very place where they were sitting buildings had stood, streets had run. The city had been so vast it took many days to travel by coach-and-six from its centre to the outskirts.

Now there was nothing but dust.

"I can't take you with me," he said. "I'm heading for the Tower..." He nodded towards the marvellous structure that dominated the eastern sky, taller than any mountain in the region, so tall its heights were often lost in the clouds. Since it was evening, lights had begun to encrust the Tower, like a sprinkling of early stars.

She said timidly, "I can come with you."

"No. I don't have the food or the water to carry a passenger. I have just enough for my own needs, and no more. I'll point you in the right direction. You can make the river in five, maybe six days, on foot. The first refugee camp is two days on from there."

She looked at him with a shocked expression on her face.

"I'll die of thirst."

"That's not my fault. I came across you by chance. I didn't have anything to do with your being here. You might make it. I'll give you a little water, as much as I can spare."

"No," she said firmly, hugging her legs and staring into the fire, "you'll take me with you."

He did not answer her, having nothing more to say. Niccolò of course did not want to send her out there, and he knew she was right, she probably *would* die, but he had no choice. His mission depended on him making the journey safely. To ensure success, he needed to do that alone, without any encumbrances. She would hold him back, drink his water, eat his food, spy on him, probe for his secrets. He would probably have to kill more than one camel to get to the Tower, if he took her along too. It was not in his plans.

Finally, he spoke.

"We must get some rest, we both need it."

Niccolò gave her the sleeping bag and used a horse blanket himself. Once the sun was down, it was bitterly cold, the ground failing to retain the heat. She moved closer to him for warmth, and the fire blocked his retreat. He had not been with a woman for so long, he had almost forgotten how pyrotechnical the experience could be. Just before dawn she crawled under the blanket with him and said, "Take me – please," and though he knew that the words had a double-meaning, that he was committing himself to something he wished to avoid, he made love with her.

In the morning, he knew he could not send her on her way. He wanted her with him, in the cold desert nights, and afterwards, in his bleak life.

"You'll have to ride on one of the pack camels," he said. "Have you ever been on a camel?"

"No, but I'll manage."

"What's your name?" he asked, almost as an afterthought, as he helped her up onto her perch. He had chosen one of the less vicious camels, one that did not bite just out of pure malice, though it was inclined to snap when it got testy at the end of a long hard day's walk.

"Romola," she smiled. "What's yours?"

"Niccolò. Now listen, Romola, we've got a long way to go, and your... you'll get a sore rump."

"You can rub some cream into it, when we stop at night," she said, staring into his eyes.

"We're not carrying any cream," he said, practically, and swung himself into the worn leather saddle.

They moved out into the desert, towards the wonderful Tower, whose shadow would stretch out and almost reach them towards the evening. He and Arturo, eight years ago, had set out on a mission of murder, and had failed even to cross the desert. This time he was well prepared, but carrying a passenger. If anything happened, he would have to abandon her,

for the mission was more important than either of them.

The city was still there, of course, he reminded himself. It was vertical, instead of lying like a great pool over the surface of the continent. It was as if the houses had been sucked up to the clouds, like water in a waterspout, and now stood like a giant pillar supporting heaven. The city had become the Tower, a monument to artistic beauty and achievement: a profound and glorious testament to brilliant architecture. Perfect in its symmetry, most marvellous in its form, without parallel in all the previous accomplishments of man. It was grace and elegance, tastefulness and balance, to the finest degree possible this side of heaven. The angels could not have created a more magnificent testimonial to art, nor God Himself a splendour more pleasing to the eye.

And at its head, the great and despised architect and builder himself, its maker and resident.

The Tower had been started by the High Priest designate, da Vinci, when he was in his early twenties.

"We need to get closer to God," he had told his contemporaries and the people, "and away from the commerce and business of the streets. We have the cathedral's steeple of course, but think what a great monument to the city a tower would be! We could use the bricks and rubble from condemned buildings, to keep the cost of the construction low. The air is cleaner up there."

Da Vinci was now truly a "high priest" living at the top of the Tower, away from the people, protected by his army of clergy. It was said that oxygen had to be pumped to his chambers, night and day, in order to breathe up there. It was also very cold, and fires were maintained constantly, the fuel coming from the stored furniture of a million inhabitants of the old city.

He had begun the work, as he had promised, by using the debris from demolished houses, factories, government buildings, but gradually, as the fever for greatness took him, so he had urged his priests to find more materials elsewhere. Gravestones were used, walls were pillaged, wells were shorn of bricks. The people began to complain but da Vinci told them the wrath of God would descend upon any dissenter, and since he was God's instrument, he would see to it that the sentence was death.

By this time the Tower had become a citadel, within whose walls a private army grew. The Holy Guardians, as they were called, went forth daily to find more building materials, forcing people from their homes around the Tower, and tearing up whole streets to get at the slabs beneath.

Not all the citizens were unhappy about da Vinci's scheme, or he never would have got as far as he did. Many were caught up in his fervour, added fuel to his excitement and determination. The guild of building workers, for example, a strong group of men, were totally behind the idea of a Tower to God. It promised them work for many years to come.

Also the water-carriers, with their mule-pulled carts; the tool makers; the waggoners carrying supplies for the builders and the Holy Guardians; the weapon makers; the brick workers; the slate and marble miners. All these people put themselves

behind da Vinci with undisguised enthusiasm.

Da Vinci began recruiting more youths, and maidens, as the Tower's demands for a larger workforce grew, and these came mainly from the city streets. When the guild could no longer find willing, strong people to join them, they sent out press gangs and got their labour that way. Eventually, they had to get workers from the farms, around the city, and the land was left to go to waste while the Tower grew, mighty and tall, above the face of the world.

Churches were among the last buildings to be stripped, but torn down they were, and their stained-glass windows and marble used to enhance da Vinci's now fabled monument. The High Priest strived for perfection in his quest for beauty. Inferior materials were torn out, removed, shipped down to the ocean in barges and cast into the waves. No blemish was too small to be overlooked and allowed to remain. Every part of the tower, every aspect deserved the utmost attention, deserved to meet perfection at its completion.

Flawlessness became da Vinci's obsession. Exactness, precision, excellence. Nothing less would be accepted. There were those who died, horribly, for a tiny defect, a mark out of true that was visible only in certain lights, and viewed at certain angles, by someone with perfect vision. There was no such thing as a small error, for every scratch was a chasm.

This was the form that his obsession took.

By the time tower was half-built the population had already begun to leave the city. Long lines of refugees trekked across the wasteland, to set up camps in the hanging valleys beyond, where there was at least a shallow surface soil for growing meagre crops, though the mountains cast cold shadows over their fields, and high-altitude winds brought early frosts.

Or people made their way to the sea and settled on a coastal strip that could barely support the fishermen who had lived there before the multitudes arrived. Many of them died on the march, some travelled by river and drowned when the overcrowded rafts were thrown by the rapids; others perished of starvation when they arrived at the camps; thousands went down with the plague and never raised their heads above the dust again.

And still the Tower grew.

"What do you think of da Vinci?" asked Romola on the third night they were together.

"He's a genius," said Niccolò without hesitation. "He is the greatest architect and builder the world has ever known."

"Does his genius come from God?"

She peered at him through the firelight.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean does God give him instruction?"

"That sounds close to blasphemy," he said, staring hard. "You're suggesting that God, not the High Priest, should take credit for the Tower. It is da Vinci's work, not the Lord's."

He drew away from her then, away from the fire, despite his fear of the night snakes amongst the darkness of the rocks.

She continued to talk.

"I used to be one of the Holy Guardians – until I

was thrown out on my ear..."

He looked at her, then behind him at the Tower, then back to her again.

"Ah," he said, "you didn't come from the refugee camp? You came from the Tower itself?"

"I...I didn't know what else to do, when we were told to leave, I thought about looking for my parents' former home, thinking it was a long way from the Tower and something of it might have survived."

"Why were you asked to leave?"

"New guards were recruited, from distant places. The old Holy Guardians have been disbanded. We are no longer permitted to remain near the tower. Most of my friends have gone down to the sea, to try to get work on the ships, guarding against pirates. Fighting is all we know. I intend to ask the High Priest if some of his – his closer Companions at Arms can return to our former posts. We were his Chosen, after all."

Niccolò smiled. "You mean he doesn't call you to his bed any more?"

She lifted her head and shook it.

"No, that's a privilege reserved for the Holy Guardians."

"I see. So the fact that you, and most of your companions, had reached the age of thirty or thereabouts, had nothing to do with you being asked to leave? The new men and women, they're not young, handsome or pretty of course?"

She stared at Niccolò.

"He recruited a new army for very logical reasons. They now consist of many small groups of men and women from different regions, different tribes."

"Now why did da Vinci do that?" asked Niccolò, softly.

"It's said that he's afraid of plots being formed against him, even amongst his trusted Holy Guardians. The separate new groups do not speak each other's language, they use many different tongues. If they can't communicate, they can't conspire against the High Priest, can they?" she said. "Since he has control over a small group of interpreters, he has complete control over the whole army."

Despite himself, Niccolò was impressed. It certainly was clever strategy on da Vinci's part. There was much to admire about da Vinci, no matter how much he was hated. The Tower was a product of a brilliant mind. The architecture, the engineering, was decades ahead of its time. Where an old support might have proved to have been too weak, da Vinci had designed a new one. He was responsible for inventing the transverse arch, the buttress, the blind arcade, and many other architectural wonders. The absolute beauty of the work – the colonnades, the windows, the ceilings – was indeed worthy of a god.

Such a pity a million people had been sacrificed to feed his egoism.

On the third Sunday Niccolò confronted her, waking her from a deep sleep.

"You've been meddling," he said, angrily. "You've been sticking your nose in amongst my goods."

She shook the sleep from her head, staring up at him. Comprehension came to her gradually. He could see it appearing in her eyes.

"I was just curious," she said. "I didn't mean any harm."

Niccolò pointed to one of the packs that had fallen from a camel. Its contents had spilled out, over the desert floor: marble statuettes, of angels, of cherubim, of seraphim.

She stared where he was pointing.

He said, "When you retied the knot, you used a knot that slipped – there's the result."

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to..."

"To spy," said Niccolò.

He could see he was right by the expression on her face and he grabbed her and pulled her to her feet. She immediately struck him a sharp blow with the heel of her hand behind his ear, then as his head snapped to the side, she kicked him in the groin. He went down in the dust, excruciating pains shooting through his neck, a numbness in his genitals which quickly turned to an unbearable aching.

She had been, after all, a soldier.

"Don't you dare try that again," she cried. "My mother was an assassin. She taught me the martial arts. I could kill you now..."

In his agony he didn't need to be told.

By the time he had recovered, she had gathered his statuettes, carefully wrapped them in their protective rags, and tied them inside the pack. He hobbled over to it and inspected the knots, satisfying himself that this time they were correct and tight. Then he swung into his saddle, winced to himself, and then gestured for her to follow on with the camels.

"Those figurines," she said, obviously trying to make friends with him again, "they're very beautiful. Where do they come from?"

"I carved them myself," he said, "from the finest block of marble the eastern quarries have ever disgorged."

She seemed impressed, though she was obviously no judge of art, nor could she know the work that went into just one of the three hundred and thirty-three statuettes. There was admiration in her tone.

"They're very beautiful," she repeated.

"They're flawless," he remarked as casually as he could. "It took many years to carve them all, and I have only just completed them. They are a gift, for da Vinci. He can no longer carve minutely, the way one needs to be able to carve if one is to produce a piece just six inches tall – objects that need a younger steadier hand – especially since he developed arthritis."

She was silent after this.

The Tower grew in size and height, as they drew nearer to its base, until it filled the horizon. Its immensity and resplendence overawed Niccolò so much that he almost turned around, forgot his mission, and went back to the mountains. It would now take him a day to ride, not to the end, but to the edge of the Tower's shadow. The Tower was like a carved mountain, a white pinnacle of rock that soared upwards to pierce the light blues of the upper skies. Its peak was rarely visible, being wrapped about with clouds for much of the time. The high night winds blew through its holes and hollows, so that it was like a giant flute playing eerie melodies to the moon.

By this time they had begun to eat one of the camels, and two others had been set free, their fodder having

been consumed and their usefulness over. The water was almost gone.

Romola showed him how to produce water, by using the stretched membrane of the dead camel's stomach. She dug a conical pit in the sand, placed a tin cup at its bottom, and shaped the membrane so that it sagged in the centre. Water condensed on its underside and dripped into the cup.

"I'm an artist," he stated, piqued by her superior survival knowledge, "I don't know about these things."

"So, an artist, but not a survivor?"

"I make out."

They reached the Tower, footsore, weary, but alive. The Holy Guardians immediately took them into custody. Romola protested, saying she was a former soldier, but she could not get them to understand what she was saying. All around the tower was a babble of voices, men and women talking to each other in a dozen different tongues. Romola's pleas were ignored and she was thrown into the dungeons.

Niccolò found a Holy Guardian who spoke one of the three languages he knew and explained that he had brought some gifts for the High Priest and that da Vinci would be greatly angered if Niccolò were not permitted an audience with the one on high.

"I am the High Priest's son," said Niccolò, "and I wish to pay homage to my father."

Messages were sent, answers received, and eventually Niccolò found himself being hoisted in silver cages up the various stages of the Tower: pulled rapidly aloft by winches through which ran golden chains with counterweights. An invention of his father.

With him went his bundles of statuettes.

He reached the summit of the tower and was ushered into a huge room on his knees, before the powerful presence of the High Priest, da Vinci. The room was decorated to the quintessence of perfection, its ceilings painted by great artists, its walls carved with wonderful bas-relief friezes, and on the cloud-patterned marble floor stood statues sculpted by the genius da Vinci himself.

A thin middle-aged man stared at Niccolò with hard eyes, from a safe distance. He rubbed his arthritic hands together, massaging the pain, while the guards stood poised with heavy swords, ready to decapitate Niccolò if their master so gestured.

"You claim to be my son," he said, "but I have many sons, many daughters – bastards all of them."

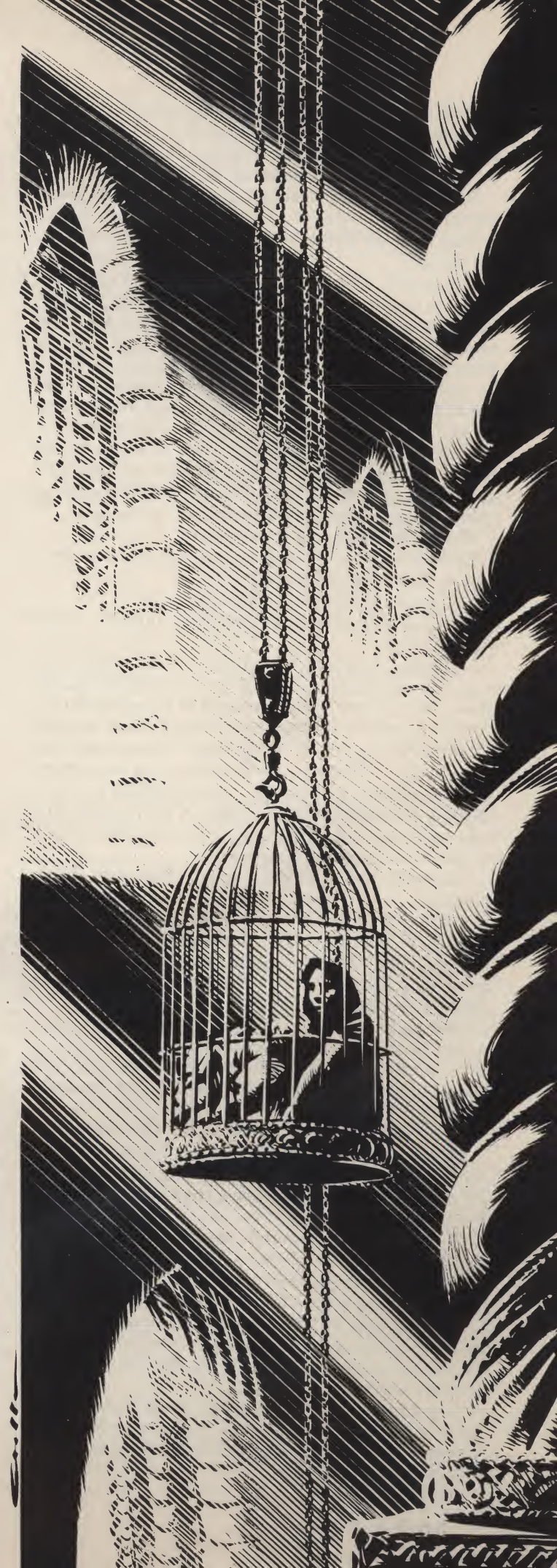
Niccolò replied, "It's true, I'm illegitimate, but how could it be otherwise? You've never married."

The old man laughed softly. "That's true. I loved only one woman – and she failed me."

Niccolò assumed a puzzled expression. "How did she fail you, my lord?"

"She scarred herself, making her loveliness ugly to my sight. She was a vision of beauty, that became horrible to my eyes..." The memory was obviously painful to da Vinci, for he paused for a moment in deep thought, a frown upon his face, then his mood changed, and he said, "What? What is it? Why did you request, no demand to see me?"

"I bring you a gift, my lord," said Niccolò. "A



present for my father. Three hundred and thirty-three statuettes, all carved with great skill by a talented artist—a genius—every one of them a masterpiece.”

“Who is this artist? Raphael? Michelangelo?”

Niccolò raised his head and smiled. “I am the artist, my lord.”

This time da Vinci roared with laughter. “Let me see the gift.”

The guards unwrapped the rags and the statuettes began to appear, were placed carefully upon the marble floor, until they covered a huge area of the great room. Eventually, they were all on view, and the High Priest motioned for the guard to bring one to where he stood. He studied it, first while it rested in the guard’s hands, then taking it in his own and turning it over and over, cautiously, but also admiringly.

“This is indeed a beautiful work of art,” said da Vinci, holding up the figurine so that the soft light caught the patterns on its buffed and polished surface. “How many of them did you say are in the set?”

“Three hundred and thirty-three.”

Da Vinci smiled. “You know the value of numbers. Three – the Perfect Harmony.”

“Or union of unity and diversity...”

“Both. And here we have the perfect number – three threes.”

“Angels, cherubim, seraphim,” said Niccolò. He began to arrange them in a large circle on the marble floor. “As you see,” he continued as he worked, concentrating, not looking up at da Vinci, “they are also an interlocking puzzle. Each angel fits into another, but only one other. You will notice that the pattern of the marble flows through the figures, like an ocean current, following the holy circle. I defy you to find where the pattern begins and where it ceases, for it is one continuous flowing band.”

“Marvellous...” Niccolò heard the High Priest breathe.

There were angels of every kind, some nude, some clothed in flowing robes, some wielding swords of justice. There were seraphim brandishing spears of truth, and cherubim with little wings, drawing on cupid bows with tiny arrows.

“But look closely my lord, at the features...”

The High Priest did as he was bid.

“...every one of them,” continued Niccolò, “has your face, when you were a young and beautiful youth.”

There was silence in the room for a long time.

Finally, da Vinci walked past his prisoner, looked down on the multitude of marble figures at his feet, all bearing his features from a time when he was at his most handsome.

“Superb,” he whispered, stroking the one in his hand lovingly. “Wonderful –,” but then he cried out, as if in pain, as he plucked a cherub from the holy ring.

“There’s one with a broken wing,” he cried.

A guard near to Niccolò moved uncertainly, as if he believed he was expected to do something about his master’s anguish, but da Vinci held up a withered arthritic hand.

Niccolò spoke quickly. “An accident, father. I shall carve another to replace it. I brought enough of the marble with me to carve three more statuettes, should it be necessary.”

“But the patterns...?”

“I can match them. As a sculptor of figurines I have no equal, save yourself in the days when your joints were supple. I am you, when you were younger, without your arthritis.”

Once more the middle-aged man studied the statuette, minutely, weighing it in his hands. Then he picked up another and did the same.

“This is truly a great work of art,” he said when he had finished, “but I shall have them inspected closely before I allow them into my chambers. After all, you may have hidden a spring-loaded trap amongst them? One of those cherubs perhaps, lets loose its arrow as I hold it up to my eye? Or some devious device to administer poison? Perhaps if I pricked my finger on one of those spearpoints? I have lived so long, because I am without trust.”

“It is part of your genius.”

“Which has rubbed off on you, it seems.”

“Am I not my father’s son?”

Da Vinci placed a hand on Niccolò’s head.

“You are indeed. You took a great risk coming here, to give me these. I almost had you beheaded before I saw you. There are many plots against me. Many. But there was something very audacious in the manner in which you expected an audience. I was curious to see you before you died.”

“Am I to die, my lord, for being your loyal son?”

Da Vinci snorted. “Don’t put too much faith in flesh and blood. You can’t prove I’m your father, and it means nothing to me anyway. There are a thousand like you, by women whose faces I hardly looked at.”

He paused and strolled across the room. “However, you have, as you say, great talent – no doubt inherited from me. I am an artist too. A genius. I have decided to let you live, at least until you carve the last figure. What use is three hundred and thirty-two? A broken circle? It must be 333 – all with my face. Go down from the tower, find your marble, and do the work. Once you have completed your task, we shall see if you are to live.”

“I understand, my lord.”

The High Priest then said to his guards, “When you take him down, send me up a stone mason. I want to construct a raised circular platform, to display these pieces.”

They then led Niccolò away.

They released Romola, and she found Niccolò. He was pleased to see her. She had holes in her hands and feet, where they had tortured her, trying to extract some kind of confession. She knew the ways, knew the limits, having been one of them herself. She professed a profound hatred for her old master, wishing he would rot in hell for his treatment of her.

“I sent him a message, telling him I was in the dungeon, and he ignored it for the first few hours, knowing they would torture me.”

She went with Niccolò and watched him, as he spent the next week carving the final figure to complete the circle. As he worked, he told her what had passed between his father and himself, high in that room above the world. They were staying at an inn, on the far side of the river. Accommodation for those not directly connected with guarding the Tower, was on the north bank, while the Tower itself stood on

the south bank. It was another safety measure, to protect the High Priest. All river traffic ceased at sundown, and anyone found on the south bank, after dusk, was immediately put to death.

"When we were out in the desert," she told him, "I often wondered...well, why didn't you bring the statuettes by river, on a barge? Why risk that terrible journey over the wasteland?"

Niccolò had left the carving of the facial features until last, and this he had completed within the last five hours of close work. He held the statuette up to the light coming through the dusty window, inspecting it. The piece, as always, was pristine, immaculate. It would fit, patterns matching exactly, into its place in the holy ring of angels. It was the sibling of the other 332 figurines – with one exception.

Instead of da Vinci's youthful countenance, it had the face of a monkey. Worse still, a monkey whose features resembled those of the High Priest. A cruel caricature.

He wrapped the statuette in a piece of cloth, before she could inspect his final work, and answered her question.

"The river is crowded, full of his agents and spies. I know how fanatical they are. I knew I could convince him, once I was here, but they would never have allowed me to reach this far. Besides, one is only permitted to carry agricultural goods by river craft, unless one bears the authority of the High Priest. I had no such authority. They would have killed me simply on suspicion, before I reached the Tower.

"The river is a deadly place, as you know. Then there are the pirates...I stood far more chance of being murdered on the water, than I did from dying of hunger or thirst out on the sands."

"That's true, and it's also true that you could cross the desert relatively undetected, until you came within sight of the Tower, of course. Yet...you took me along with you, knowing the risk. I might have been one of his spies."

He stared at her.

"Yes, you might. I think you were – and still are. It is fascinating, and horrifying to me, that people like you are prepared to go through torture for the sake of discovering his enemies. It's an enigma I don't think I shall ever solve...but I am glad for my father's sake that he has his devoted servants."

"You wrong me," she said, looking into his eyes.

"No," replied Niccolò, "I don't think so. You are still besotted with the mystique of the man, and you think that if you can uncover some plot against him, he will reinstate you, and you'll return to his favour. You have been blinded, Romola, but I shall restore your sight."

Niccolò dispatched the statuette to da Vinci by courier. Then he asked Romola to walk down to the river with him, so that they might cross, and gain audience with the High Priest, once that man had had time to gaze upon the final figurine.

On their way down to the river, Niccolò said to her, "You have been asked to guard me, haven't you?"

She stared at him, then nodded.

"Yes. That's why they let me out of prison."

"I thought so. Da Vinci would never let me run around loose, of that I was sure. So it had to be you."

They reached the jetties, and waited for a boat to



come which would carry them across.

A short while afterwards a barge came down the river with a giant man at the tiller. He had a gentle face, a good face, and he was wearing a knitted waistcoat that looked new. When his boat reached the jetty he clambered ashore. The Holy Guardians swarmed over his craft, inspecting every spar, every beam, before allowing the dockers to unload his cargo. The only goods permitted to be carried by river barge, were food and drink, and if you were found with any other freight you were executed on the spot, no excuses accepted. The big man nodded to the two people who watched him amble past them.

When the big man returned, his barge had been unloaded, and his craft stood high in the water.

"Will you take us across?" asked Niccolò.

"Two sesterces," growled the giant.

"Agreed."

The three of them boarded the barge, and the giant raised the lateen sail, and the craft caught the current. They headed downriver, towards the sea.

Romola looked puzzled, stared at the far shore, then into Niccolò's face. "Where are we going?"

"Away from here," answered Niccolò.

"Out to sea?"

"Yes. We shall be island-hopping for as long as necessary, staying one jump ahead of da Vinci's people, I hope."

She nodded towards the giant at the tiller, with his knitted waistcoat and benign expression. Romola became angry, clenching her hands, making them into fists. Niccolò stepped away from her, warily.

"The two of you are together – conspirators?" she said.

"We came to help da Vinci destroy himself, and now we are making our escape. Now, I realize you're an ex-soldier, and I still have the lumps to prove it, but my friend Domo here..." he indicated the giant, "is not an effete artist. He could snap you in two, like a twig, so no violence please."

She stared at Domo, who smiled broadly. He did indeed appear to be a man of enormous strength, and while all three of them knew Romola would put up a spirited fight, the outcome could not be in doubt. Especially since Domo had a wicked-looking baling hook in his free hand.

Niccolò said, "We don't want to kill you, Romola – at least, I don't, though gathering from the looks Domo has been giving me, he thinks I am a fool, and jeopardizing our mission. I'm afraid you got under my skin, out there in the desert, and I've fallen in love with you. However, if you try anything, anything at all, Domo will kill you where you stand, and throw you to the fish. Is that understood? I shall be unable to prevent him, or help you."

She stood a long while, as if weighing up the situation, and then turned her head.

The craft eventually reached the ocean, and Domo set a course for the outer islands, behind which the sun was settling for the night. Niccolò stood in the bows, watching the prow cut through the water as the wind carried them westwards, into the red glow of the evening. When it was almost dark, Romola came and stood beside him.

"How did you do it? The assassination?" she asked.

"Oh, he's not dead yet, but he will be."

"How? Did you poison the statuettes?"

Niccolò shook his head.

"No, I gave him a gift – an imperfect gift. Perfection is an obsession with him. Now he is caught in a cycle of madness. He will not destroy the gift, for the angels have his face and it would be like destroying himself. Yet one of the figures mocks him – resembles him in a crude way, but actually has the face of a monkey. Without this figure the ring of angels is incomplete, an obscenity – three hundred and thirty-two statuettes. The pattern on the marble is broken, the circle unfinished, yet with it, the art is marred, twisted into a joke of which he is the brunt.

"He will go mad, it will destroy him."

Her eyes were round. "You're sure of that?"

"I'm certain of it. He loved my mother very much – my friend the sage Cicaro was there at the time – but he had her executed after my birth, because... because her beauty was marred."

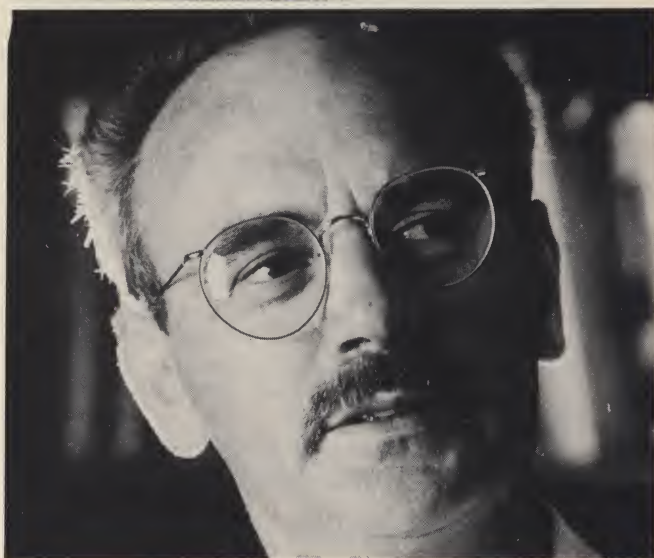
"In what way?"

"Stretch marks," said Niccolò. "In giving birth to me, she was left with stretch marks on her abdomen. He destroyed her because she was imperfect, blemished by a natural act of which he himself was the author. He killed someone he loved because of his madness for perfection. Now he will destroy himself – he's caught in the web of his own vanity. He has to have the circle of angels, for they immortalize his youth and beauty, yet he cannot have them, because one of them is a mockery. He will rage, he will consume himself with frustration and fury. He will destroy himself..."

"You are a genius," she said.

"I am...subtle."

They stood, watching the water sliding beneath the craft, as darkness fell. When it became cooler, once the sun had finally gone, she put her arm around him.



Garry Kilworth, born 1941, is the author of the novels *Hunter's Moon: A Story of Foxes* (1989), *Midnight's Sun: A Story of Wolves* (1990) and many others, including several fine children's books. A longtime contributor to *Interzone*, his last story here was "Hamelin, Nebraska" (issue 48). He has just returned to his home in Essex after living for a couple of years in Hong Kong.

In the Land of Purple Flowers

Geoffrey A. Landis

“So are you going to accept him or not?” Fiona tugs at a lock of her hair and doesn’t answer. She presses her heels into the flank of her unicorn, and, obligingly, he trots forward.

Tiri giggles. “Hey, come back here.” She whispers in her mule’s ear, and the mule breaks into a trot to catch up to her sister’s unicorn. “You can’t run away from it, you know. You’ll have to tell him something, yes or no or ask me again later.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Will you go to another village to look for a man, then?” asks Tiri. “Like Aunt Cicilly did?”

“Maybe I will, and maybe I won’t.” Fiona reins her mount around in a tight circle, until he stands up on his hind legs and pirouettes and she has to lean forward and clutch his neck to stay mounted. He turns his huge head to look at her with a deep brown eye, and snorts with a breath that is fresh and vaguely mint. She pats his head absently. “No, of course I wouldn’t leave you behind.”

“I would be sad if you did,” the unicorn says, dropping back onto all four feet. “You have been a faithful companion.” He ambles forward, reaching to the side to grab a mouthful of green.

“It would be fun to see more of the world than just this sleepy corner, though,” she says.

“So what’s to see?” asks Tiri. “You think you could find a boy better than Jasp? He’s nice.”

Fiona nods slowly. “He is nice. Sometimes I wish he could be more, well, more serious, though.”

Tiri shakes her head. “So what’s so wrong with being happy?”

“Nothing, I guess.” Her unicorn flicks an ear, but makes no comment. “I just wish – I don’t know.”

They are as different as sisters can be, Fiona small and dark, her hair braided with the purple flowers that grow abundantly on the hills; Tiri large and lanky, with calico hair cascading in large, loose curls down her back. Their day’s riding has taken them far from their village, past all the trails they know, perhaps as far as they’ve ever ridden. As they ride up onto the next ridge there is a sudden vibration, as of the sounding of a gong so enormous that its note is felt rather than heard, and a suddenly strange smell in the wind, as of metal burning, or of autumn lightning. Tiri’s mule stops, confused, and Fiona’s unicorn paws the ground and rears.

“There is something unusual here,” says the unicorn, swivelling his head to sniff the wind first in one direction, then another.

Fiona shrugs, and rubs his ears affectionately. “We’ve never been this far out before. Everything is bound to be unusual.” She nudges him slightly with one heel, and, after a brief hesitation, he walks on. In fact, Fiona can’t recall anybody she knows having ridden out this far. There is nothing of interest in this direction, just the underbrush, increasingly tangled and impenetrable, and the occasional overgrown ruins of an ancient building. It is a direction that people just never go. Through the tangle of weeds the animals pick their way surefootedly, occasionally exchanging a word with each other in their own language. The sisters let their mounts choose the way, knowing that they have been bred to find invisible paths in even the most seemingly impenetrable thicket. In the distance, occasionally visible through the canopy of forest, rise the mountains.

“More than that,” says Tiri. “I wonder if it could be dangerous?”

“Don’t be silly. Nobody would allow something dangerous to be here without any warnings.”

Fiona rides ahead, and, after a brief hesitation, her sister follows. They crest the ridge and look down. In the valley below is a white sea of fog. The mists twist and swirl around the protruding towers of a strange village. As they watch, the fog rolls away, revealing a village of exotic beauty: slender, angular towers of brilliant white stone with curious crystalline windows, grass growing only a few inches high, straight walkways of the same white stone.

Her sister protests that this is an evil place, but Fiona is already riding down to it, wisps of fog cuddling around her catlike as she rides. She calls out merrily for her sister to follow if she dares. Expressing misgivings, Tiri does so. Just on the edge of the city she catches up.

“I have never seen anything like this,” Tiri’s mule comments quietly, shaking his head. The unicorn just snorts.

From close up, the village of towers is surrounded as if by a soap bubble, iridescent in transparent swirls of violet and amber. Fiona dismounts and walks toward it. She touches it, and laughs when her hand slips through the bubble without resistance, appear-

ing veiled in turquoise and silver on the other side. In the very centre of the strange village is a huge building, fragile and involuted like a sea shell.

"If you will be going in," says the unicorn, "do you mind if I wait for you outside? A human city is no place for me."

As an answer Fiona pats his neck affectionately. He wanders into the shade of a walnut tree, sniffs the ground, then circles around three times and curls up to nap.

"There can be no good in a place like this," says Tiri, coming up behind her. "I know it. I recognize this place now."

"Oh, it is beautiful. How can something beautiful be evil?"

"Don't you remember the old stories? This is the faerie village. The inhabitants are the spawn of Shaitan, the master of deception."

Fiona laughs, with a gentle, tinkling voice. "Everyone knows those old stories are just pleasant fictions."

"Grandfather told us of it, remember? Everything in the faerie village is deception," says Tiri, her voice deep and serious. "If you enter, they will keep you for a hundred years, and everyone you know will be old by the time you come back out."

Fiona laughs. "Could you be afraid, really? Afraid to enter?"

There can be nothing to be afraid of, for they both know that there is nothing left in the world that deliberately hurts humans. Yet Tiri stares long into her sister's dark eyes before she finally admits, yes, she's afraid.

"Then stay behind," says Fiona, and turns around and crosses the bubble into the village.

The streets of the village are smooth and even, paved with a hard white stone that is rough and unresilient to her feet. Wheeled vehicles wrought of enamelled metal in shiny colours roll along them with a soft purring noise. She walks further in, and finds that there are places where the streets themselves move along the ground like rivers frozen yet still flowing. She is delighted.

The first person she meets is a woman of indeterminate age, with alabaster skin and short grey hair. The woman speaks a greeting in words that Fiona cannot understand. She smiles and shakes her head, and the woman speaks again, more slowly, her accent ancient and quaint. "A visitor from outside," the woman says with a smile. Her peculiar way of pronouncing her words makes them all seem to have extra syllables. "Welcome. What is your name?"

"I am Fiona."

The woman nods. "You are welcome to look around. If you have any questions, ask anybody." Before Fiona can speak to her again, the woman strides away, vanishing into a doorway.

There are other people walking along the streets from one building to another, all dressed as the woman was in unusual fabric, brightly coloured and slightly shiny. A few of them greet her by name. The people are friendly, but seem serious and preoccupied. One, a young man about her own age, walks up to stand beside her. When she finally notices him and turns to say hello, he gives his name as David.

"Fiona."

"I know," he says, his voice low and trilling in the

peculiar and fascinating accent that the villagers all seem to share. His hair is brown and slightly curled, and rectangular windows in front of his eyes give him a wide-eyed, questioning look that she finds amusing. "Shall I show you the city?" He reaches out his hand to her.

She takes it in hers. "Please." She shakes her head to clear it. Something about David, she could not quite say what, fascinates her. Perhaps it is only that he is so different from anybody she has ever known. So different from Jasp.

They stop in front of a small building, one no more interesting than any of the others as far as she can tell. David describes it as a dynamic isotope power system. She has no idea what that means, but he describes it, obviously quite proud, as something that is somehow crucial to the life of the village. "Lucky we happened to have it within the circle," he says. "It turns waste into energy for us, and will outlive all of us, I'm afraid."

To her it is only words, but there is something in the proud tone of his voice she loves listening to. She turns to him. "So distant out here, do you get many visitors? Before today I didn't even realize that there was a village here."

"A few."

"I'm surprised. You seem so far away from anybody. The people here hardly pay much attention to visitors."

"Oh, everybody knows you're here. The Centre gets a visitor every few days or so. They figure, you're here today, but the next day you'll be gone, so why bother?"

"I suppose so," she says, thinking that this is a strangely brusque attitude to take towards visitors.

"Can you answer a question for me?" asks David. "What year is this?"

She laughs, but then looks at him and sees that his expression is completely serious.

"Why, can't you see?" She spreads out her arms to indicate the hills visible in the distance, covered with myriad tiny flowers. "It is the year of purple flowers."

He smiles. "No, no," he says, "could you tell me the date?"

"Date?" she says. "Now is now. How can you date the present?"

"Ah. We used to date years," he says, thinking, "counting from the birth of a god, Jesus Christ."

She giggles. "How peculiar," she says. "Well, it is three hundred and two years from the building of the tower at Yrning, nineteen thousand and eleven from the exodus of the people of the sky."

David sighs. "That doesn't do me any good."

She shakes her head. "Well, I don't happen to recall any gods being born recently. Long ago, yes."

"How long ago?"

"I guess if you wanted to, you could count this as the year seventy-three thousand, two hundred and, ah, sixteen from the coming of the twin gods named," she pauses to think, "Naga Saki and Hero Sheema. Of course," she continues, "no one actually worships those gods – no one I ever heard of does, anyway – but I remember when we learned the names. I think they were evil gods, gods of destruction? Is that good enough?"

"So long," David says, quietly, "so very long. I see that the new gods outlasted the old, after all."

But there is much to see and wonder at: the city, the people, the mechanical birds singing in the city square, the tiny box of glass that glides noiselessly up the side of one of the buildings to give them a panoramic view of the city and surroundings. When David sees her delight, he laughs. "This is nothing. Let me show you where, I assure you, the *real* magic takes place."

The building in the centre of the village is laid out with entrances all around, a corridor spiralling inward from each entrance. David chooses one of the entrances and they go in, and he leads her down the corridor. On each side are more doors. He opens one, and she is surprised to see that it is only a shallow niche or closet, well-lit but empty. She expresses her puzzlement, and David laughs. "A bit more than just that, I think. Step in, and you will see."

She does, and he closes the door. Instantly liquid darkness surrounds her, embraces her, and for a moment she cannot move, cannot even breathe. Then to her surprise she suddenly realizes that she is standing in a well-lit room with a desk covered with papers. She looks behind her, but there is no door or any sign of the closet she had stepped into, and David is nowhere in sight. One whole wall is covered with equations and mathematical curves, glowing slightly. In the middle of the room, suspended in mid-air, is a peculiar shape, sharp angles and complex curves coloured in subtle shades of blue and green. She looks around, to the side, behind her, and when she turns back again there he is in front of her. The windows in front of his eyes have disappeared.

"This is where I work," he says. "Do you like it?"

"Very nice," she says, a little hesitantly, for in truth she cannot understand how anyone could possibly do any work, or want to, in a closed-up room with no sunlight or trees. She points at the sculpture in the middle of the room. "And is this part of your work?"

"Yes, it is indeed. I study, ah, knots in six-dimensional space. This is a three-dimensional projection of a surface in six-space." To the wall he says, "computer, rotate, v axis, omega point one."

The knot writhes and changes shape and colours.

"Very pretty." She looks around, without much interest. "Is this all that's here? This little room?"

"Oh, no! This is not a billionth of what's here! Look." He waves his hand, and the wall with the equations disappears. Where the wall had been is now open space.

"Oh!" she says, and steps through into a sunlit clearing in shades of red and gold, surrounded by peculiar tall trees such as she has never seen before. In fact, each tree is completely different from any other; this one with golden leaves somewhat like a maple, but bark like a sycamore and branches with tiny red fruits; the next one covered with tabby-striped fur in grey and pink. She strokes the tree's fur, and in response it purrs at her with a soft, deep rumble.

David snaps his fingers, and the office flattens into a picture, then shrinks to a dot and vanishes. A butterfly alights near them, and as Fiona kneels down to look at it, it suddenly turns into a strikingly beautiful woman with alabaster skin and violet eyes. With a



start she realizes that it is the woman she first met, but now much younger, and beautiful. The woman asks how she is enjoying her tour of the city.

"Oh, very much!"

"I'm glad." To David she says, "it is fifteen hours. You're keeping track?"

"Of course."

"Good." The woman stretches her arms. In the blink of an eye she turns into a dove, and darts away into the forest.

Fiona watches her fly away. "Then you really do come from a faerie village, and this is the faerie land, the other side of reality."

He laughs. "You could call it that if you want, I suppose," he says.

"Then is it evil?"

"Not that I know of."

"I didn't think so. Tiri is just so *timid*." She looks up, and sees with surprise that there are tiny people in the sky. "Then can we fly?"

"If you wish," he says, and takes hold of her hand. In an instant, with no feeling of motion at all, the clearing drops away.

"Could I do it alone?"

"I will teach you someday."

From the air she can see that the grove they have been in is just a small area in the centre of the village where the sea-shell building – strangely missing now – once stood. As they rise the village shrinks, and they can see tiny fields, houses, roads – not at all the forested valley the village was in. To the hazy north is the blue of water, and on the shores of the water a gigantic city. Its distant towers dwarf those of the village below them, glistening as burnished copper.

"What could that be?" she asks, puzzled. "I don't know a city near here."

"It is called Chicago."

"Can we go there?"

David shakes his head. "I'm afraid not. That is Chicago as it was thousands of years ago."

"Oh."

Flying, they meet other people, all of whom are friendly and know her name and David's. After a while he takes her up and up, until the land beneath them fades and disappears into mist and they seem suspended in pale blue. Above them a circle of brightness appears. They pass through the circle, and with that they are back in the glade they started from.

They stand beneath a tree with brown feathers and a large brown eye at the end of each branch. Another tree, one with branches hung with delicately coloured crystalline globes of all sizes, plays music for them as the breeze ruffles its branches. With a flourish, David materializes a bunch of grapes from mid air.

"Oh!" she says. "How did you do that?"

He smiles and raises his hands. Grapes fall from his fingertips. Each grape has a different colour and tang. He introduces her to several new foods, and other people come to them, each delighting in bringing forth their own exotic foods, flaming ice-cream sundaes, tiny animals made from some translucent flexible material, bits of chocolate wrapped in colourful wrappers and other strange foods so numerous that Fiona has a hard time keeping track. Devising new foods is a common pastime here, David explains, and everybody wants her to try theirs. In this enchanted

forest the people seem less distant and solitary, and she decides that they must only have been a bit shy about meeting strangers. She calls out foods to him, and finds that fruits and berries and bread he can conjure up with a wave of his hand, but most everything else she names he just shrugs his shoulders, shakes his head, and laughs. Many of these he cannot make are very common, things like sorbspice and talla.

After a while they walk off into the forest. After a moment David puts his arm around her, and the feel of his arm seems right and natural. She puts her own arm around him, and then, on a sudden impulse, turns to him and kisses him on the nose.

"We have met many people here," she asks, "but is none of them special to you? Have you no betrothed?"

David looks down at the ground and shakes his head slowly. "No. There was a girl I used to see, another scientist..." He sighs. "I suppose, if nothing had happened, we probably would have ended up getting married. But she was in Europe when it happened."

"Europe?"

"Very far away."

"And your family?"

"They all died very long ago."

"That is so sad. Then you have nobody. Well, now you have me." She reaches one hand behind her neck and unclasps her shift, letting it drop to the ground. Beneath it she is wearing nothing at all.

"Don't you – isn't it – won't anybody –"

"Silly. Don't you know what to do?" She fumbles with his shirt, unfamiliar with the buttons.

"Oh, yes."

"Then, do it."

He kisses her, hesitantly, and she kisses him back with vigour, and rolls him back onto the ground. "A moment," he says, and makes a quick gesture. The sunlight dims to a purple glow, and the trees lean together to give them an impenetrable private glade. The leaves on the ground below them puff out, and in a moment they are on a soft mattress with silken pillows.

He seems a bit surprised at how forward she is. She is still confused by him, and she wonders if perhaps his people have different notions about sex, that what she is doing violates some taboo she knows nothing about. Once he starts, though, she finds that his hesitancy vanishes and his love-making is full of enthusiasm and vigour. Some of what she shows him is new to him, and he responds with some quite pleasurable surprises of his own.

After the intensity of his passion is spent, she snuggles into the crook of his arm and gazes into the sky. "My sister claims that your village is faerie," she says, "but I am quite sure she is wrong. Is it?"

He hesitates. "I'm not sure I know what that word means to you."

She laughs. "Silly. You are as human as I. Your village, it is all so charming and old and filled with machines. You are no faerie folk; you are folk from the great age of machines. The distant past. But how it you are here, I do not know."

He rolls over and looks at her. "Yes," he says.

"So tell me."

He thinks for a moment. "Seventy-three thousand years ago..."

"The great age of machines."

"You could call it that. I think we have reason to be proud. Our life was not yours, Fiona. It seems to me you live much as your fathers lived, and theirs, and no one has much curiosity or drive to change. Then, we were working on learning the secrets of the universe." He makes a gesture, and suddenly it is night. Stars are visible by the millions, crisp as jewels and coloured, not the constellations she knows, but others, distorted and alien. The familiar glitter of the ancient skycities is missing. Fiona shivers and moves closer to him, but he fails to notice. "Do you even know what the stars are, those points of light in the night sky?"

"Yes, of course," she says, thinking him rather silly for asking. "They are other suns, much like our own, but very very far away."

"So you do know! But don't you feel the urge to explore? To travel out among the stars, and see what is there?"

"Silly. They look as if they just hang there, barely out of reach, but that's an illusion, you know. Why, if you could travel even as fast as a beam, it would take years to travel to the nearest of the stars, and your lifetime and more to travel to the farthest."

"Yes," he says, meditatively. "So you haven't forgotten everything. Indeed, the stars are far, very far. What we did here at the Centre was to search for a means to make them accessible, perhaps even to travel faster than a lightbeam."

Above the treetops the sky brightens from deep blue into violet, and the strange stars fade into dawn.

She shakes her head. "Of course, you must have known that that is impossible."

"Is it? We had thinkers who said so too, but we believed that any theory must have flaws."

"Even a child could show why that could not be," she says, smiling. "Why, if you could travel faster than a beam, don't you know that you could also travel through time? How can you think to travel into the past? That is clearly absurd."

"Just so," he says, softly. "We thought maybe we could find ways to cheat the gods. We were arrogant, maybe, but... Well, as you say, we knew that space and time are one. At the Centre we studied the nature of time, seeking to negate the tyranny of distance. One day we did an experiment on time itself, to see whether the metric of spacetime could be bent to our will."

"We succeeded, but we failed to realize what success meant. We projected a sphere of titanium no bigger than your thumb into the future. Travel forward in time is no problem, you see. But when we tried to bring it backward, something went wrong. We – the whole research centre, buildings and houses and everything – were pulled forward instead. Into the future. We've lost our place in time."

"It was in vain," she says. "There is no way to travel faster than a beam. If there were, the skydwellers would have found it long ago."

"Skydwellers? People who travel in space?"

"Lived in space. Tens of thousands of years ago."

"We had space colonies?" His expression mixes



hope and yearning. "What happened to them?"

She shrugs. "You can't live in space, not prosperously, not without support from the Earth. In the times of turmoil, there were always people who thought it important to support them."

But as time went on, she explains, as wars and wanting dwindled and were gradually forgotten, people found less and less reason to supporting dwellings in space. Eventually most of the sky dwellers returned to Earth to be reintegrated into life. A minority refused to return. "And so they built a huge vessel, a world in itself, with the last of the material they had from Earth, and set out for a distant star they thought to have a habitable planet, the trip to take thousands of years. The exodus of the people of the sky, it was called, and the historians still speak of it."

"The stars," he says, softly. "We did it. We went to the stars."

She shudders. "Can you imagine it? They condemned their children, and their hundred-times-grandchildren, to live in a tiny flying village they could never leave, and even if they wanted to, they couldn't come back."

"Wow," he says. "A starship. And what happened to it? Did they find a planet to settle?"

"I don't know," she says. "There is an ancient machine for listening to the sky —"

"A radiotelescope?"

She shrugs. "Perhaps one of the other villages keeps listening. I guess somebody probably does. I've never known anybody interested enough to want to find out."

She stops, confused, when she sees the tears running down David's face. "Was it so important to you, then?"

"It was my dream. It was my life, and you have forgotten. We had hoped...we'd thought that someday..." He falls silent.

"I'm sorry."

"We are all alone now," he says.

"You have me," says Fiona, and takes him in her arms.

He is silent for a long time, and when he finally speaks it is barely more than a whisper. "Yes."

They rock to the music of the trees, the branches swaying and dancing with them, and they make love again.

Later, David clears away the trees, and they join the others and feast again. No matter how much she eats, she never feels overstuffed; no matter how much she dances, she never feels tired, though surely hours must have passed.

"Tell me about what it was like to live when the world was always changing," she asks David. "Did people really starve to death?"

"No, of course not. At least, not in the parts I lived in. Maybe in other countries people sometimes did."

"How awful! And you still had plagues?"

"No, no plagues. We had some diseases. Not very many."

"People actually died of them?"

"Sometimes."

She shudders. "Ugh! All in all, I think I like things better the way they are."

"Is your world so perfect? Isn't anybody unhappy?"

She digs a toe into the dirt. "Well, nobody dies of it."

"And how did your world come to be the way it is? Do you know? Do you still have history?"

"Yes, the old stories of the way things were." She pauses to think. "In the great age of machines, long ago, your people loved to change things."

"Progress, we called it."

"They kept changing the way they lived, every generation abandoning the way of the one before. And so they kept on changing the society that they lived in until they finally arrived at one that they didn't want to change." She shrugs. "One where people were happy enough with the way things were. And so it stayed."

"I understand what puzzles me about you now," he says. "Your people have no sense of wonder. Surely what I've shown you must be new and strange to you, but you take it all in stride."

"Oh, no — it is wonderful, so old and curious. It really is."

"But you have no sense of wonder about it."

"Sense of wonder," she says. "Is that important?"

"Wonder was very important to us," he says.

"Then I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I love you anyway. I shouldn't, but I do."

He gestures around him, and with the sweep of his hand sparkles dance in the air. "But don't you sometimes wish for what you have lost? Once, Fiona, once we had the power to remake the world; to shape it to our aims and to make of it whatever we wanted."

She touches him gently on the arm. "But we *did* make the world we want."

He smiles wistfully. "Then tell me about your world."

She tells David about her family, her sister, her father, her unicorn, even about her once-almost-betrothed, Jasp. "They will love you, David. They will make you feel at home, and forget some of your pain over the world-that-was."

He closes his eyes as she kisses him.

"Do you really love them?" he asks. "Really and truly?"

"Oh, yes. More than anything else. More than my life itself."

He picks up her chin and turns her face toward him. "Oh, Fiona. And more than me?"

"No." She drops her eyes. "But they are more than love, they are my life. I know I used to complain about how life has no surprises — I did! Until you came along! — but I could never live severed from my people."

Tears are running down David's face. "Then you must leave. Now. Hurry." He pulls her rudely up, and rushes her away. "Computer!"

Suddenly David and the feast and the field and the dancers disappear, and she is standing alone in the shallow niche. David appears outside.

She looks around in confusion. "Where did the dancing trees go?"

"They were never real. That was a virtual; an unreal place. Now, hurry! There's little time! You must leave here at once!" He pulls her down the corridor, and she reluctantly follows.

"No! Why? Can't you at least come with me?"

"No. I can't. Fiona, in the outer world, I am millennia

dead. Entropy can be fooled, but never cheated. If I were to leave this city, I would be no more than dust."

She drops her eyes. In a small voice she says, "then I will live here with you." She looks up at him. "We will be happy, and my family will come to visit me. It will work out. You'll see."

"I would that it could, Fiona. But you must go. Look." He touches a patch on the wall and speaks a phrase in an accent she cannot understand. In front of them suddenly appear Tiri and Jasp and her father. They are grim-faced, and her father and Jasp struggle with some strange machine. Fiona calls out, but they don't answer. "They can't hear you, Fiona. They aren't really here. This is a scene just outside the city."

"I recognize that machine," she says slowly. "It is one of the old machines from the village that we were never allowed to touch." As she watches, the villagers stand back, and a stream of pale blue fire fountains out of the mouth of the machine to splash against an invisible wall of air a few metres away. Jasp and her father appear to be disappointed, and angrily make adjustments to it. Nothing happens. Jasp kicks the machine.

"Yes, some sort of a plasma cannon," David says. He seems almost amused. "So you saved a few of the old machines after all." He turns to her. "They are trying to force entrance to the city, Fiona, to bring you home. It is a hopeless task, I'm afraid; what separates this city from the outside world is no material object, and cannot be pierced by any weapon we know of. I'm sorry. I wish that it could."

"Why?"

"They know, I'm afraid. I'm sure there must be some people who remember the stories. A hundred years is not so long, after all. Come with me, Fiona. Hurry! I will explain as we go."

He raps on the wall and the scene vanishes. He grabs her hand – a bit roughly, she thinks, hurt and puzzled by his behaviour – and they run through the city. "You see, we are still in the grasp of the same time field. It's the momentum; we have too much temporal momentum to stop. This city will only be here for a few more minutes, before it is again hurled into the future. We pause only for a single day in a hundred years, and then are carried away into the stream of time."

"At first we kept in touch with scientists, and spent each day in a frantic race trying to catch up with the world. But after a few days, nobody cared about us any more. The world had moved on, and left us behind."

"If you were to stay, you would never see your friends and family again. I wish you could. But you love them too much." As they run they have reached the edge of the city. He thrusts her out of the field, and she can suddenly hear the shouts of her family. But she turns to David.

"But –"

"Goodbye, my love. Remember me, as I will remember you every day for a million years."

"Wait! Can't you –"

With the sound of an enormous, invisible gong, the city vanishes. In the suddenly chill air, all that stands in the place it has been is grass and tiny purple flowers.

"Fiona!" shouts her father, running toward her

across the place where the village once stood. "Are you all right, child? We were worried!"

"Tell me, tell me, what was it like?" asks Tiri.

The unicorn gets up, stretches, and walks over to nuzzle her cheek. "I'm glad you're back," he says calmly. "A hundred years is a long time to wait."

But Fiona can only clutch his mane, bury her face in his neck, and sob.

Geoffrey A. Landis last appeared in *Interzone* with the much-praised "Paradigms of Change" (issue 53). He is a not infrequent contributor to *Aboriginal SF*, *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* and other American periodicals; and his first book, a collection of short stories, has just appeared from Pulphouse Publishing in their "Author's Choice" series.

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¹ *Locus* Nov. 1989; ² *Locus* Feb. 1990; ³ *Locus* Feb. 1991

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Interaction

Continued from page 6

and other materials to the countries of Central Europe and the FSU (Former Soviet Union) is urged to contact Fans Across the World first – not because it is the only channel for such contacts, but because it can give them detailed information on clubs, readers' groups, magazines and other publications, and even preferred authors. And, last but not least, advice on how to pack the material to ensure that the contents of parcels are not pilfered in transit by customs officers and postal sorters.

Fans Across the World's current UK liaison is Bridget Wilkinson, at 17 Mimosa, 29 Avenue Road, London N15 5JF.

Joseph Nicholas
London

Editor: Apologies again (says he wearily). I was sort of aware of Fans Across the World at the time I wrote my remarks, but had forgotten them. I'm sure they do sterling work, though, and interested readers may wish to contact them.

Dear Editors:

Following the recent exchanges in *Interzone* concerning sf in the former Soviet bloc, I thought I'd take the opportunity of letting you, and any writers who may be interested, know that I am in contact with Dmitry Belokurov, a literary agent for a young Ukrainian publishing house "Daimon," which specializes in sf and fantasy. They are very keen to contact British writers to discuss the possibility of publishing translations of their work. Dmitry is also working with an sf magazine *The Youth and Fantasy*, which would welcome submissions from British writers. Dmitry may be contacted at 320030, Ukraine, Dnepropetrovsk, Karl Marx prospect 42, Flat 14. Or via myself.

Ian Brooks

Flat 4, 311 Dickenson Rd,
Manchester M13 0NR

Dear Editors:

Happy Birthday, *Interzone*!

I just had to write to congratulate you on ten successful years, during which time *Interzone* has consistently been the best science-fiction magazine in the world, bar none.

Your Tenth Anniversary Issue was brilliant – Great stories by four of my favourite writers and two really good ones by people I'd never yet come across (Graham Joyce and Robert Irwin). The interview with Storm Constantine was lively and very illuminating. John Clute and Nick Lowe were on top form as were S.M.S. and Ian Miller and Kevin Cullen. Mary Gentle, Paul Beardsley and Wendy Bradley

did their usual fine jobs. I'll stop here before the list gets too boring. All in all, I couldn't ask for more from a single issue of a single magazine.

I wish *Interzone* all the best in future years.

Arthur Straker
London

Dear Editors:

As editors of *In Dreams*, Kim Newman and I would like to bring to your attention the 27 (yes, count them, 27) original stories that will appear in our anthology of stories about the 45 rpm single and its associated culture. Gollancz will be publishing *In Dreams* in June this year as an original paperback, with an introduction by noted rock critic Charles Shaar Murray (author of *Crosstown Traffic* and *Shots from the Hip*). As for the stories, they are:

"Fat Tuesday" by Ian McDonald;
"The Discovery of Running Bare" by Jonathan Carroll;
"Night Shift Sister" by Nicholas Royle;
"Worthless" by Greg Egan;
"Nyro Fiddles" by F. Paul Wilson;
"Thrumm" by Steve Rasnic Tem;
"Digital to Analogue" by Alastair Reynolds;
"Sticks" by Lewis Shiner;
"The Elvis National Theatre of Okinawa" by Jonathan Lethem & Lukas Jaeger;
"Candy Comes Back" by Colin Greenland;
"Honey I'm Home" by Lisa Tuttle;
"The Reflection Once Removed" by Scott Bradfield;
"Life in the Groove" by Ian Watson;
"Black Day at Bad Rock" by Christopher Fowler;
"Riders on the Storm" by Mark Timlin;
"The Shiny Surface" by Don Webb;
"Weep for the Moon" by Stephen Baxter;
"The Man Who Shot Anarchy Gordon" by Ray Davis;
"Don't Leave Me" by Barrington Bayley;
"Falling Stones" by Peter F. Hamilton;
"Changes" by Andrew Weiner;
"Wunderkindergarten" by Marc Laidlaw;
"Bold as Love" by Gwyneth Jones;
"Blues for a Dying Breed" by Cliff Burns;
"Last Rising Sun First" by Graham Joyce;
"Reed John-Paul Forever" by Steve Antczak, and
"Snodgrass" by Ian R. MacLeod.
Paul J. McAuley
Strathkinness, Fife

Dear Editors:

I co-edit *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (St Martin's Press) with Terri Windling. The first and second volumes, published in 1988 and 1989, won the World Fantasy Award for best anthology. The fifth annual collection

will be out in July 1992. We are now reading for the sixth. This will include all material published in the year 1992.

I am looking for stories from all branches of horror: from the traditional-supernatural to the borderline, including high-tech science fiction, horror, psychological horror or anything else that might qualify. If in doubt, send it. This is a reprint anthology so I am only reading material published in or about to be published in the year 1992. The submission deadline is December 15th 1992. Anything sent after this deadline will reach me too late to be considered for 1992. And the sooner I get the material the better.

There is a section in front of the book that covers "the year in horror," or "the year in fantasy." These include mention of magazines and publishing news concerning the horror and fantasy fields, novels we've read and liked, and in my section, "odds and ends" material that doesn't fit anywhere else but that I feel might interest the horror reader (like trading cards, weird non-fiction titles, etc). But I have to be aware of this material in order to mention it. The deadline for this section is January 20th, 1993.

When sending material to me please write YEAR'S BEST HORROR on the envelope. Terri Windling's address is: 781 S. Calle Escondido, Tucson, Arizona 85748, USA. She covers fantasy exclusively and I cover horror exclusively.

Ellen Datlow

c/o OMNI Magazine
1965 Broadway
New York, NY 10023

WRITE TO INTERZONE

We enjoy receiving feedback from our readers, and we hope to publish a lively letters column in each issue. Please send your comments, opinions, reactions, to the magazine's main editorial address. We may not be able to reply to all letters, but we do read them and may well be influenced by them.

Hitting the Punchline

Stan Nicholls meets Robert Asprin

According to Robert Asprin, humour, and humorous fantasy in particular, needs a certain kind of talent to pull off. "I almost hate to say it, but unless one has the flair, hang it up, OK?"

"Most of the people who have that comic sense seem to have honed it in front of an audience. I used to do theatre, and at one point wanted to be a nightclub entertainer, before deciding there wasn't enough money in it. But I think that someone who does not have that kind of background, who has not worked a live audience, is lost at trying to find the necessary pace and timing.

"I often refer to humorous writing as like doing radio; you know, there's no audience feedback for you to work off. So you've got to have faith, and say, 'I know they're laughing out there,' then give it two beats and hit the punchline."

Asprin, associated with humorous fantasy and sf because of his *Myth and Phule's Company* series, started out as an accountant with the Xerox Corporation. Towards the end of his twelve year stint with the company he wrote his first novel, *The Cold Cash War*, and had it published in 1976. But credit for his break into professional writing, he says, belongs to author Gordon R. Dickson. "When people ask, 'Can you give me advice? How did you do it?' I can give them advice, but when I get to 'How did you do it?' I kind of bog down, because Gordon R. Dickson was my mentor and took me under his wing.

"He encouraged me to write and introduced me both to my first publisher and my first agent. Thanks to his support I was not only the one in a million who had an agent for my first book, I was the one in two million who sold my first book on sample chapters. Only I can't tell five hundred wannabes to go camp on Gordie Dickson's doorstep until he introduces them around New York."

The Cold Cash War, a moderately successful science-fiction satire, set a pattern that has recurred in all Asprin's subsequent work. "Often I'm a reactive writer, and go counter to existing trends, or lampoon something I think has got out of control.



Robert Asprin

"In that book I was reacting to all the speculation I saw about corporations getting to run the planet in the future. I read this stuff from the perspective of someone who had been working for Xerox for a number of years, and it was clear to me that people making these predictions had never been closer to a corporation than mailing in their phone bill. Corporations can't agree on the colour of toilet paper, much less rule the world!"

A part from a handful of fanzine articles, and a column for *The Society of Creative Anachronism Journal*, his track record was slight when he entered full-time authorship. And the decision to go into sf/fantasy was at least partially pragmatic. "I've always felt that I'm a storyteller who happens to write science-fiction and fantasy books, as opposed to a science-fiction or fantasy author," he says. "My major connection with the field, in all honesty, was when I started doing conventions and got to know the writers."

Nor was there any apprenticeship with short stories. He went straight into novels. "It always bothers me when I hear people say they're going to begin by doing short stories and work their way up to books. What I'm hearing is someone saying they're

going to learn to paint by doing miniatures on the head of a pin and work up to a full-size canvas. Short stories are perhaps the most demanding discipline of all.

"And the fact is I don't like writing short stories. There's far too much work for the return on them, particularly in our field. If you're writing a short detective story you can have your character drive up in his car, get out, walk into a building, take the elevator to the third floor. But in science fiction you have to have him driving a hovercraft and using a lift tube, because all the gimmickry is so much a part of the genre. Trying to fit a short story into that narrow framework, when you're having to define the world and the technology to boot, is a real struggle.

"A short story is like a stripped-down racer; there's no room for anything extra in there. You can't do what you do in a novel and take three chapters to introduce your characters and the situation and the world. You gotta get in, get on with it, get out, you know? For a long time the only short stories I wrote were the ones I did for *Thieves' World* (the shared world anthologies he edited with his wife, author Lynn Abbey), which is cheating. First off, because I'm selling them to myself, and secondly, if you look at those *Thieves' World* books you'll see a lot of the people we had writing for us were essentially novelists.

"When you're starting to write, the biggest problem is the immense time investment, which is why people go for short stories. If I hadn't had a signed contract, a deadline and half the money up front, I'm not sure I would have had the tenacity to finish *Cold Cash War*. But watching the calendar gives you an immense incentive. You've got to say, 'If I want this thing done even a month ahead of deadline so I've some time for rewrites I've got to do so much a week.' You just have to sit down and write."

Asprin's breakthrough came with the *Myth* series. "I wanted to do *Another Fine Myth* as my second novel," he explains, "and showed an outline for it to my agent. He wrinkled his nose and said, 'Humour doesn't

sell. Have you got anything serious?" So I gave him another idea I had, for a novel called *The Bug Wars*. About a week later he called and said he liked the characters in the *Myth* book, although he wasn't mad about the story, but suggested I write it anyway. I knocked the book out in maybe three or four weeks.

"What heavily flavoured the *Myth* series is that right in the middle of my trying to do this they had a week-long festival of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby Road movies on television. Dedicated writer that I am, I ended up every evening camped in front of the TV watching them. I had a lapboard and during the commercials scribbled notes for the books, and the characters from the Hope and Crosby movies kind of worked their way onto the page. So I ended up with two characters who were essentially con artists who could talk their way into or out of anything. Mostly into it. And when things got too rough they'd go, 'Special effects!', which was the magic.

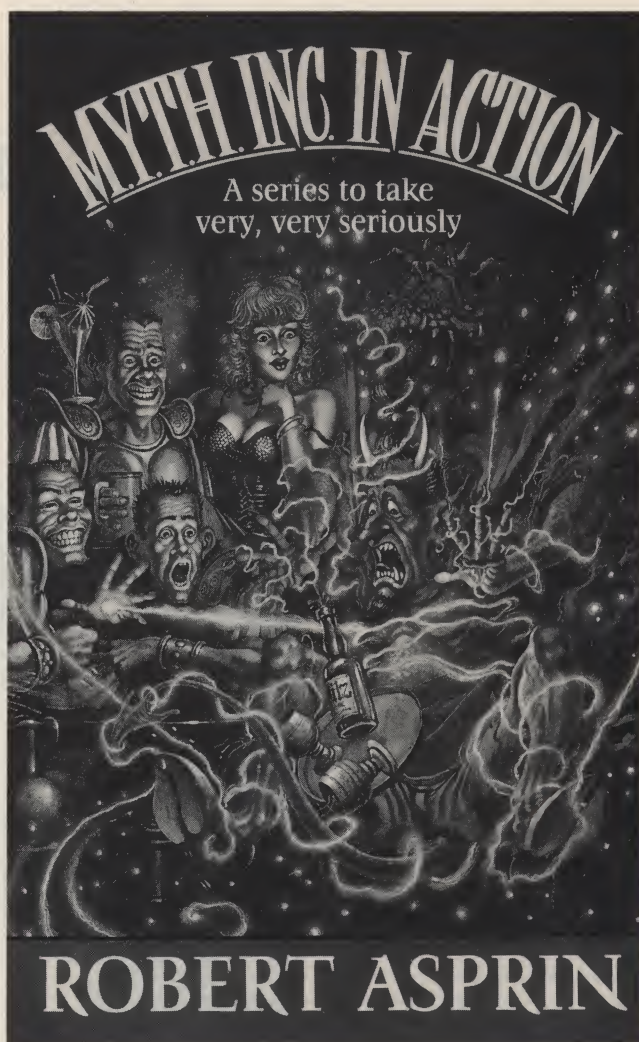
"As I say, *Another Fine Myth* took me three or four weeks to write; *The Bug Wars* took me a year and a half. Guess which one took off to the sky and which one sat there and gathered dust?"

Like *Cold Cash War*, the genesis of the *Myth* books was reactive, the target this time being the fantasy book of the mid-70s. "Conan, Elric and similar heroes were really big, and high fantasy was getting very, very pretentious. So I thought, 'OK, instead of doing brawny barbarians slicing up sorcerers, I'll do it from the viewpoint of the sorcerer. As a matter of fact I'll make him a kind of schlocky sorcerer.' It went from there.

"Stephen King, in his introduction to *Night Shift*, talks about the close relationship between humour and horror. He says they're just a hair's breadth apart, and points out that horror done badly is funny and humour done badly is horrible. Humorous fantasy's that close too. It's like trying to go in with a scalpel, and of course to do it right it's got to look effortless."

Asprin believes too many would-be writers underestimate how hard it is to convey that seeming effortlessness. "Everybody at one time or another here in the States has picked up a baseball and thrown it or hit it with a bat. But nobody thinks they can walk in and pitch the World Series. On the other hand, at one time or another everybody wrote a paper for English class, and therefore think they could be a professional writer if they just took the time to do it. But there's a difference between doing it and doing it professionally. It's not that easy."

When he has a new book part completed he often tours the convention circuit to test it against a live audience. "I've discovered that within the US



humour can be very regional. In *Myth Inc. in Action* I tossed in a couple of Teamster jokes, and up around Chicago, Detroit and the industrial areas they're holding their sides and rolling on the floor. They think it's funny as hell. I try reading the same thing in Mississippi or Florida and get blank stares. They don't know anything from Teamster jokes. So it's not only very personal, it's also very regional.

"Yet the biggest areas outside the US that are buying the *Myth* books are England and Germany. I can't imagine two wider examples of national senses of humour, and it intrigues me that both those countries are really getting into them. As near as I can track, it's because my writing is traditionally very character-heavy, and a lot of the stuff I deal with is to do with crises, friendships, loyalties—fairly universal concerns, you know?"

An equally important ingredient, he feels, is complete conviction about what you are creating, no matter how offbeat. "I saw a Disney TV special on animation and they talked about 'cartoon physics.' An example of this, and one of the things we've all seen in a hundred cartoons, is a character

running off a cliff and not falling until he realizes he's standing on thin air. There's a kind of parallel with fantasy there. What you have to do is construct a separate reality which is internally consistent, and then operate within it, the way cartoons do. So it's not so much a question of suspending disbelief as transplanting it."

With his newest series, *Phule's World*, he is satirizing sf in the same way the *Myth* novels satirize fantasy. But he has his criticisms of science fiction. "I don't mean to put down the sf writers, though occasionally it sounds like it, but I'm primarily interested in people.

"If I did a story about a colony starship going off to another solar system, and it's going to be en route for three generations, I'm more interested in what it does to your head if you're that middle generation and realize you're going to live and die without seeing the outside of the ship, based on a decision somebody else made. I find that much more fascinating than, 'What's in the engine room?'"

"I sometimes feel that my colleagues writing sf are simply plugging the space programme with a thin story shell. A lot of them of course came in through academia, or the various

science industries, such as NASA. My background before coming into writing was working as an accountant for Xerox, so I couldn't have had more of a corporate, bottom-line oriented mentality compared to the academic types. But I think that actually helps me build the readership, because the point of view I tend to look at things with is much more in touch with the guy on the street. I'm sure you'll have noticed that a lot of my stuff has a money slant in it.

"Another problem with science fiction is that it's almost dated as you write it, because we're making such vast jumps in technology. Isaac Asimov made an intriguing comment after the first moon landing. He said every writer in the world from Cyrano de Bergerac and H.G. Wells on took a crack at the first man on the moon and what it would be like, and not one of them anticipated we would be watching it live on television. It's so hard to second guess the technology.

"*Phule's Company* is going after the military sf genre; all the *Dorsai* novels from my old mentor Gordie Dickson and whatnot. Again, going counter to the pattern, like in the *Myth* books. The *Phule's* books are sort of science fiction, he said staring at the ceiling with tongue in cheek, because they are set out there on other planets. But they're not what you'd call high tech or hard science fiction. They fall under the science-fantasy category."

The first time he encountered the phrase it was being applied to *Thieves' World*. "I was scratching my head trying to think why anyone would call it science fantasy and not just straight fantasy. The nearest I could come up with was that this was a term being used by people who for years had put down fantasy and said it was drek and no good. Now they'd found something they liked, and rather than reversing their stance on fantasy they created a whole new label so they could say, 'Well, fantasy is still terrible, but science fantasy is OK and *Thieves' World* is science fantasy.' I'm not sure if you have it over there, but there's a lot of snobbery that goes on between the science-fiction and fantasy people here in the States."

Some people have credited Asprin with creating the shared world concept. How does he react to that? "I think it's amusing. I actually had someone tell me I'd invented the first new literary form in two hundred years!

"The point about the *Thieves' World*, and the reason we're often called on by others as a reference point, was not only were we forerunners but that for a change the whole thing was creatively owned and controlled. It was not owned by a movie studio or a publisher. It wasn't like *Star Trek* or *Spider-Man*. If we didn't like our

treatment we could move off to another publisher, and we were handling all the merchandising and sub-licensing. Just because someone publishes the books don't tell me they get to negotiate or get a piece of the gaming monies. So the form wasn't that different really, but the behind-the-scenes financing and control of it was completely different.

"What I enjoyed about *Thieves' World* is that it enabled one to compare writing styles. You would have six, twelve top science-fiction and fantasy writers working the same setting, the same characters, often dealing with the same situation, from different viewpoints. If you ever wanted a textbook to compare, say, A.E. Van Vogt's style to C.J. Cherryh's style, it's hard to find anything which eliminated more variables than the *Thieves' World*."

As for his own reading tastes, sf and fantasy, while always present, never formed the bulk of it. He is much more likely to go for hardboiled detective novels or mainstream fiction. "It's embarrassing when I do conventions because I've not been staying abreast with our own field," Asprin admits.

"After I sit here writing for eight hours a day the last thing I want to do to relax is read more fantasy. In particular, one of the hardest things for me to read is somebody else's humour. Because the *Myth* books have been successful a lot of the publishers send me manuscripts of other people's humour to puff, and usually the nicest I can say is, 'Well, it's cute.' Which is damning with faint praise. Having been doing it for so long, you get finely tuned into what you think is comic timing and what makes a joke work, so when you try reading somebody else's you're saying, 'Ah! They blew the line there,' or, 'They rushed that sequence; they could have built it into five other bits.' I'm probably the worst audience to run someone else's humorous fantasy past.

"When someone shows me their writing and says, 'Can you give me some pointers?' I can show them how to write it like I would write it, but that does nothing towards developing their own style. By way of example I might point out the different stand-up comics, and say that W.C. Fields is totally different than George Burns, but they're both funny. It's not that one's right and one's wrong; they each have their own signature, delivery and timing."

So he puts a lot of effort into working it all out in advance? "Yes and no. What it comes down to, basically, is that you put your head into the little universe you've created.

"Everyone has their own style. I personally hate rewrites like the plague, particularly when I'm doing humour. Nothing is as bad as re-reading the same joke for the eighth time. So I end up writing the entire book straight

through, without going back at all, and let the action and dialogue come spontaneously. Then if I want to do a rewrite I go back and plough an entire chapter. I can't do line edits, I've got to pull the entire scene and re-do it in a different place, or with a different cast of characters.

"Every so often I re-read one of my earlier books to check out something for continuity and find stuff in there I honest to God don't remember having written. From that viewpoint I can lean back and say, 'Hey, this is pretty good,' and admire my own work without any feeling of arrogance.

"In many cases I'll find one of those little gags that came out of the flow as I was writing and went straight from the mind onto the page without me consciously retaining it. Of course I've been doing this since 1978 and maybe my brain's failing."

Robert Asprin's books are published in the UK by Century/Legend. The cover illustration pictured opposite is by Fangorn.

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The Unluckiest Thief

Brian Stableford

In Capracola, which is on the northern rim of the Maundering Marshes, the land lies low and the climate is warm and moist. The region is a perfect home for fevers of every kind, and the people who live there recognize two gods opposed in every way: one who is handsome and honest, and who brings good health to those who please him; and one who is ugly and deceitful, who curses those he hates with, vile disease.

The dutiful and orthodox majority of men worship the former god, and pray hopefully for his protection, but they shelter in their midst a heretic few who see the world differently. Fevers, as everyone knows, can excite as well as kill, and wherever there are fevers there are men who are avid to live more vivid lives, reckless of destruction; such men are readily turned to the fearsome carnivals which are the clandestine rites of the Lord of All Fevers. So it is that in Capracola there are men who think themselves men of quality, but who turn nevertheless to the worship of that unclean demon of ague and hot excitement.

During one long, hot summer when Capracola was seared by more than the usual number of epidemics, there was built in a secret glade of one of the region's most noisome swamps a gaudy temple to the ugliest among the gods. A master mason was inspired to hew from glossy soapstone an image of his patron, which rivalled in misshapeliness the worst of all the gargoyles on the gaudy temples of the distant capital. In order to provide a worthy image of the bloated cyclopean eye of the Emperor of Decay the legendary jeweller Chiravar – the greatest goldsmith and gewgaw-polisher in the nation – was seduced into the secret cult, and fully half the wealth of its members was given to purchase a massive piece of amber, which Chiravar carved and smoothed to the limit of his artistry.

Chiravar was ever a boastful man, who dearly loved to see his work displayed, and once the eye was in place he became very ardent in the cause of seeking converts to his odious god, in order that the greatest feat of his artistry could be more widely appreciated. Alas, rumours of the wondrous nature of the Amber Eye were so profligately put about by its maker that they soon attracted the attention of a clever jewel-thief and devout lover of beautiful things, who went by the name of Umbalila. It immediately became Umbalila's dearest ambition to steal the gargantuan gem from the

secret temple, and sell it for a handsome price in some far-distant city.

Umbalila knew full well that this robbery would be the most dangerous he had ever planned, but he reckoned that the ruination of a monstrous idol would surely be deemed a very virtuous act by the god who was worshipped by the majority of his fellows. Were he successful, he reasoned, he would not only be rich for the remainder of this life, but might legitimately hope to be forgiven the many petty sins which a man of his profession was unfortunately compelled to commit. He knew that the victims of his crime would pursue him vengefully to the very limit of their abilities, but he also knew that a company devoted to illicit worship could hardly go crying to a magistrate to complain about the desecration of their idol, and thus he calculated that the risk was tolerable.

Emboldened by these arguments, Umbalila set out to make his way along the treacherous trails which led to the secret temple, following silently in the footsteps of an unwary idolater. Once arrived there, he hid himself away until darkness fell. By that time, the edifice was quite deserted. He crept furtively from his hiding-place, and went expeditiously to work with his chisel, and a solvent which would loosen the glue which fixed the huge amber eye in place.

The work was not easy, for the eye had been cleverly set in the stone face, but Umbalila was both patient and efficient in his labour. With great skill he disfigured the image of the god of disfigurement, and mutilated the cunningly-carved face of the emperor of all mutilation.

Within an hour the mighty gem was in his leather bag, and the rough-hewn face of the Visitor of Maladies was even more scarred and scratched and blemished than it had been before.

The delighted Umbalila rushed northwards into the night, intending to cross the foetid swamp before first light and reach the mouth of the pass which would take him through the mountains to the great cities of the fertile plain.

Before he had gone a mile along his chosen path, however, there became audible to Umbalila a soft but oddly alarming noise, which was like the sound of bubbling laughter. It came from no particular direction, but no matter how he accelerated his pace, he could not leave it behind.

Umbalila told himself that the noise was only

marsh-gas gurgling in the stagnant pools, but no sooner had he come to that conclusion than the sound began to grow in volume. It was quickly amplified into a hoggish chuckling, which no one but a noodle could have mistaken for the rustling of wind in the treetops, or the chittering of insects in the grass. Umbalila, who was no noodle, realized that the god of corruption himself had witnessed the desecration of his idol, and had taken leave to be interested in the fate of its yellow eye.

Umbalila's heart was pounding in his chest, and his breath became difficult to draw, but he ran on and on, as fast as he possibly could. He splashed through muddy pools until he was smudged and daubed with slime and grime from the hair on his head to the space between his toes. Invigorated by sheer terror, he ran like a maniac or a man set on fire; but the laughter which chased him only grew, first into a guffaw, then into a bellow, and finally into a helpless howling which informed him that the god's scabby sides must be about to split and spill his festering guts upon the ground – if there were any ground in that mysterious world beside the world where the gods dwelt.

Umbalila's panting turned by degrees to sobbing, and when he stumbled into a patch of soft and clinging mire, which caught his booted feet and held them very stickily, he made no immediate shift to stir himself again. He decided that he had no alternative but to beg for mercy where he was, and he prayed for the eventual cessation of that ludicrous laughter.

By degrees, the laughter ebbed away, until the voice which had blasted his ears with it was capable of ordinary speech.

"Oh, Umbalila!" said the invisible god of pestilence and plague. "Thou art a sad and sorry sneak, who hast chosen a very peculiar way to worship me."

It had been no part of the thief's intention ever to worship the god whose temple he had raided, but Umbalila was not about to confess this fact to the deity himself, if that deity were pleased to think otherwise. He had some suspicion of how sensitive the gods might be about such matters as the homage they desired.

"I have served thee far better than that ridiculous poseur Chiravar," answered Umbalila, cunningly, "for he, in his vanity, sought to give thine idol an unnaturally beautiful eye, while I have given it instead a ghastly blindness, which surely does more justice to the representation of a god of debility and imperfection."

"Why else would I laugh?" asked the hoarse and wheezing voice. "I am a merry god, unlike my stern counterpart. I have always loved a macabre jest, and there is only one thing which could amuse me more than to see my idol blinded by a cocksure thief."

"And what is that?" asked Umbalila, who disliked to be offered riddles, even by a god.

"To see the thief entrapped by his hurry to escape, of course," replied the god. "To see the silly fellow's feet securely gripped by a slimy bog, so that he may be drawn most glutinously down into its depths, until he drowns very soggly in wet black filth."

While this answer echoed in his ears, the unlucky thief began to struggle agitatedly, regretting that he had not thought better of pausing in his flight at this particular place. But the god's words had captured

the truth of the situation. He had by now sunk knee-deep into the mire, and was sinking still. The more of him was beneath the surface for the mire to grip the more eagerly it clutched him, and he was sinking faster by the second.

"Thou must save me," cried Umbalila to the invisible presence, "or else thy gorgeous eye will be lost forever, never to be seen again by the worshipful eyes of men."

"But thou hast told me how horrid its loveliness must seem to my own jaundiced eye," replied the voice of the god, "and thou little knowest how right thou art in that matter. In any case, I count the swamp my faithful friend, for it is host to countless splendid fevers, and I could not be so mean as to deprive it of its hapless prey – for I am a god of generosity; as well as jests."

"It seems to me," replied Umbalila, who was by now submerged to the level of his waist, "that thy jests are lacking in authentic humour – and I have seen no evidence at all of thy so-called generosity."

"I am sorely wounded by thy bitterness," answered the voice, with an odd thrill of delight. "Thou cuttest me to the quick, indeed thou dost! And in return, I shall be very pleased indeed to grant thee one last boon before thou chokest on clammy mud. Canst thou guess what it will be?"

"I wish I could," said Umbalila, whose head and shoulders only were now above the surface of the cold and viscous pool. "But I fear that I have not the time to receive it, let alone to guess it."

"Do not be dismayed," said the voice, "for I am a god, and have it in my power to make a single second last for an apparent eternity. I will do that if thou wilt only beg me to, so that you may have all the time you need to think and feel and say whatever is in your mind."

Umbalila saw that the time which remained to him was short indeed, for the bog was very hungry to devour him, and so he did not hesitate at all before crying out: "That will be boon enough for me, if thou wouldst be good enough to oblige me in it – but I bid thee to hurry up, for I am sorely in need of some delay."

No sooner had Umbalila spoken than he ceased to sink, with his head still safely above the noisome surface of the glutinous mire. It did not take him long, however, to realize that this was not the most desirable position in which to spend eternity.

"Perhaps," he ventured, "thou wouldst grant me a further boon?" He was not entirely certain that the suggestion would be kindly received, for he had heard rumours of the impatience of gods whose generosity had been tested too far. But it seemed that the Lord of All Fevers was indeed a good-humoured sort, for the laugh which answered him was by no means derisory.

"Fear not, little thief," chuckled the god. "The boon I had planned to grant thee is but half-delivered, and the stopping of time is only the first and lesser part of the whole. I permitted the interruption of thy destiny merely in order to enable thee more fully to enjoy a far greater gift – for what, in my infinite generosity, I have decided to do for my worshipful

thief is to let him look upon my *real and actual* eye, so that he may see how poor a thing he stole."

And then, displayed before the helpless Umbalila – who now discovered that the freezing of time would no longer let him speak, or turn his head, or close his eyes – there appeared the actual countenance of the loathsome god whose idol he had spoiled. He saw that the ugliness of the real face was a million times as horrid as any image which might be carved by an earthly sculptor, and realized that he was doomed to look into that dreadful cyclopean eye until the Emperor of Decay consented to let time and nature take their murderous course.

It would make no sense to say that the interval lasted for a thousand years, or a million. No time at all elapsed – and yet, for Umbalila, it was an eternity.

Even the most ardent and feverish worshipper of the Visitor of Maladies would have found the experience unbearable, but Umbalila had ever been a devout lover of beautiful things, and he knew better than any man alive what an antithesis of beauty was paraded before him.

And whether the experience was unbearable or not, Umbalila had no alternative but to bear it.

There was opportunity enough, when the Lord of All Fevers allowed the stream of time to flow again, for Umbalila to utter a single scream of terror and

madness, which echoed very eerily in the humid wilderness of Capracola. There was opportunity too for the god of plague and pestilence to let loose a gale of lusty laughter, whose echoes filled the desolation of his own eternal world. Both of which circumstances go to prove how very dearly the ugliest of all the gods loves his little jests.

It merely remains to add that of all those who have heard this story, none has ever doubted that it is appropriately titled. Umbalila was certainly the unluckiest thief who ever lived...and, eventually, died.

Brian Stableford, a frequent contributor to this magazine, is the guy who knows more about the history of science fiction (and fantasy) than any other being in the universe. See, for example, his recent anthologies from Dedalus – *The Dedalus Book of Femmes Fatales*, *The Second Dedalus Book of Decadence*, etc – and his copious contributions to Neil Barron's reference books *Anatomy of Wonder* (1987), *Fantasy Literature* (1990) and *Horror Literature* (1990). But as well as being a scholar of the field he is also a distinguished writer of fiction, as his ongoing fantasy trilogy which began with *The Werewolves of London* (1990; now available in Pan paperback) goes to prove.

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Mutant Popcorn

Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

Hook is a brave, silly film that sets out to disarm its audience as thoroughly as its villain, and banishes shame to a faraway place the camera never sees. Filmmaking of tremendous quality, and a quite unnecessary amount of intertextual literary sophistication, are dumpstered on a didactic view of the human situation so jaw-looseningly tacky that the nausea response gives up in blank amazement. Barrie's bittersweet view of the condition of childhood – gay and innocent and heartless – has vanished from the scene with the same silent thump as Tiger Lily and her impolitic native Americans. All bitterness in *Hook* is reserved for the *denial* of childhood, and all the sweetness gushes in with its recovery. The emotional centre of play and novel, at least for adult consumers, has always been Wendy, and in particular her willing, gentle, and poignant detachment from fantasy to enter a world where it needs to be controlled. But in the film's rethink, it's the grownup Peter's and his learning to surrender that control, in his rediscovery of the parental relationship as a place where adult responsibility and childhood imagination meet. Too much of the former, and you spend all the time on the portable phone and your son becomes a failure because you're not at his ballgame. Too much of the second, and you never get to experience the incandescent joy of fatherhood in the first place. Message ends.

Hook is very upfront, even belligerent, about this twisting and crude sentimentalizing of its source. If you can't take the taste of sugar, stay out of the sweetshop; you don't like the movie, fine, it's a free country, you're just emotionally shrivelled and withered of imagination and your kids are probably growing up disturbed and hating your guts. Spielberg's waited a long time to do this subject, and if the hero's conversion reads as an apologia for his director's regression to the infantile at least he's not going to tax anyone's impatience by trying to disguise it. And to a great extent it's a strategy that pays off. Resist, and the next 135 minutes of your life will be a journey into hell. Surrender now, and you will be permitted to savour some of the most



Dustin Hoffman in 'Hook' (TriStar Pictures)

fabulous sets, set-tos, and set pieces ever assembled on one screen; one great performance (Maggie Smith), several it would be hard work to fault on points (notably Robin Williams, Charlie Korsmo, and most surprisingly Julia Roberts, despite clearly not getting to wig much with the rest of the cast), and one so bizarrely awful it takes on a kind of surreal virtuosity of its own. What is that *accent*? Who wrote this *dialogue*? What is this man

being paid? Poised on a cusp of transient perfection between the sublime and the horrendous, Dustin Hoffman's mugging is a microcosmic one-man inventory of the whole bewildering candystore. Just see: here is Det. Inspector Philip Collins trying to do something with the line: "The literary history of the family does suggest..." Here is an enchanted window on old London town that makes Canary Wharf appear *magically small*. And over here

is some terrible makeup, the most bloodless massacre in the history of piracy, and the best case yet made for John Williams' slow death by repeated insulin shock, including positively the most ghastly song performed in modern cinema. (Keep an eye for Hook's reaction shot where he thinks What the blue blistering barnacles is this doing in my scene?)

Yet there's plenty to engage the higher brain functions, too. You can admire once more the metaphysical paradox of the dying-fairy routine with its positively Jesuitical adult mind-games (if you don't believe in fairies, how come you feel so guilty about one dropping down dead?). You can pat your back once for each quote spotted from Barrie's dialogue and plotting, and award a wince for each heavy ironic twist. You can talk in a loud droning voice about the influence of Manichean cosmology and *The Golden Bough* on the metaphysics of Pan's and Hook's connections to Neverland. And you can ponder the implications of this Wendyless version of Peter's homeland where girls are an alien concept, where it's okay amongst all the knitting of emotional loose ends to abandon poor old Tink with a broken heart, where Peter seems so much more concerned for his son than for his daughter, and where all the good guys are so ambivalent about the villains' exemplary dress sense, to the point of having to rescue the lad forcibly from having his ear pierced. But in the end all these are forlorn defences against the inexorable tide of nostalgia, tearjerk, and goo, strong enough to sweep the most dauntless swimmer away. It's easier if you just let yourself go, and shower it all carefully off when you get home.

With scarcely more subtlety, the directions to Neverland – “second star on the right, and straight on till morning” – are the last orders spoken by another Captain Jas., as the Starship Enterprise finally self-deconstructs after a quarter-century of ever-dodgier follies, and its motley cast of tucks, corsets, and hairpieces sails out of the picture with undisguised relief to get the life so long denied them. And what an awfully big adventure it's all been. Rarely has a welcome been so outstayed as that of these seven economically-talented players (plus dear Grace Lee Whitney, still there with a smile in the corner of the shot) with their unfortunate outfits, undeliverable dialogue, and dependably the worst production design in whatever price range they aspired to.

But it's a sad, sad moment, because the *Star Trek* films were the last and unlikely flagbearers of the classical space-movie tradition. For all their crimes against intelligence, they were the last institution in cinema that

encouraged us to think about the breathtaking, bigscreen interplanetary future that most of us who spent quality childhood time in sf Neverland still believe, in our infantile hearts, is out there waiting for history to catch up. And the really heartbreaking thing about the *Star Trek* movie incarnation is the way it surrendered so abjectly to its own embarrassment. The death kiss, traces now easily visible on the corpse, was the moment the cast began to get control – particularly Leonard Nimoy, who's never concealed his violent lack of sympathy for the material. From the third film on, they've been falling over themselves trying to disown the space-operatic nonsense and find something more credibly real to put in its place. So as the hexalogy has dealt in succession with male menopause, Oedipal rivalry, bereavement, eco-awareness, the spiritual quest, and



now renewing the world order, they've progressively excused themselves from any willingness to think about what the contextual immensities of space and the future mean for our understanding of all those and much bigger questions. And that's a betrayal. *Star Trek* may not have been the ideal material to start with, but it was the best we had; and this patronizing send-off does its best to erase the lot.

As a final analysis of the *Star Trek* phenomenon, **The Undiscovered Country** is quietly depressing. For the benefit of any who stayed home, this is the one where the Klingon empire snuffs its ozone with an industrial ecocatastrophe and ceases to pose an armed threat to the Federation; visionary Klingon leader hatches peace treaty, only to be overthrown by conspiracy masterminded by “Klingon conservative elements” (and, to be fair, some hometeamers) fearful of “the end of history”; last-ditch peace conference scheduled in the Romulan schoolbook depository; dumpty tumpy dum. As in *IV: The Voyage Home*, the other instalment where

Nimoy had essential creative control – this time he lurks behind a story credit and xprod attachment – *VI* makes no attempt to mask its distaste for characters, setup, and myth, and tries to make its fumbling apologies by turning the whole thing into a frighteningly stupid homily on the times. The difference is that now the whole *Star Trek* myth itself is retrospectively rewritten as a naked allegory of cold-war global politics, taking assiduous care that each element is virtually subtitled in the lumberingly insistent script.

What Gene Roddenberry, a good man with some noble ideas and a lot of respect for intelligence, would have made of this self-styled tribute is uncomfortable to imagine. Even on its chosen terms, the reading it gives of the new galactic order is disturbingly inept. The end of the Klingon threat is the result not of a political but of an environmental transformation, a containable Chernobyl that has the helpful effect of destroying their ecosphere but conveniently not ours. The consequences of universal peace are lip-servicingly described as a dark and possibly dangerous place, but we don't see a lot of the Klingon food queues, ethnic massacres, or infrastructural collapse that presumably follow, nor of the Federation smugly folding its arms and marching off in search of four more years. (But then for the toughest prison planet in the galaxy the Klingon gulag seems comfortably devoid of needle-sharing, slopping-out, and sexual abuse of fellow inmates.) The Federation's preaching of “inalienable human rights” is intriguingly challenged by the Klingon C-14-C (“the very name is racist”), only to be rebutted with the claim that “everybody's human.” (Apply the simple substitution code supplied on your ticket and you'll find this means that George Bush's quirky interpretation of the UN declaration of human rights is the one true reading because nowadays the whole world is American. Arguably true, of course, but no less alarming for that.)

Even as entertainment, it's pretty thin gruel, despite the best-ever guestlist and a novelty computer effect they're perhaps rather too pleased with. There's a persistent sense of everyone's having given up trying, of no longer being able to tell the difference between necessary and gratuitous dumbness. Necessary dumbness was something Roddenberry well understood: it's stuff like space food being blue, all alien planets having filters for suns, and Sulu (who must have had scheduling problems) spending all but one scene commanding the Starship *Insert*. But gratuitous dumbness is the kind of audience abuse meted out by such lines as “There is an old Vulcan proverb: ‘Only Nixon could go to

China'," or "Perhaps you know Russian epic of Cinderella: 'If shoe fits, wear it'"; by some would-have-it detective plotting that has the once steel-trap-headed Spock surrender, in the same breath he claims Holmes for an ancestor, to a mode of logic that can only be called Californian; and by a pandemic misuse of the Klingonese Encyclopaedia of Shakespearean Quotation for which cretinous would be a term of endearment.

Much of this seems expressive of an unconcealed contempt for audience – the script's perverse gloss on its subtitle, in particular, is either a horribly unintended irony or a calculated and cynical defiance of its audience's wit. One of the things that makes the Spielberg of *Hook* still an intermittently great moviemaker is his courage to believe in hideously embarrassing things in front of hundreds of millions of people. History will have its sweet revenge by remembering *The Voyage Home* as Leonard Nimoy's most lasting contribution to cinema, and by striking altogether from the record this feeble attempt to demote a myth that's sustained a generation to a clumsy, ephemeral, and already-outdated message. Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, and enterprises of great pith and moment lose the name of action. Old Neverland proverb, misquoted out of context. Enterprise over and out.

(Nick Lowe)

Tube Corn TV Reviews by Wendy Bradley

That was the week that was... Now all you fortysomethings busy singing the signature tune can just sit there and quietly picture me in me Millicent Martin wig while I explain to the younger generation that we are harking back to a satirical programme dealing with the week's events while they are still fresh. Yea, all right. *Drop the Dead Donkey* without a plot will do to be going on with.

Of course the week we are talking about is the week ended 28th February 1992, on account of this organ having a rather longer lead time than your average satirical TV show, but that doesn't invalidate the point.

That was the week that was,

It's over, let it go...

No, I'm not planning to sing the next 12 paragraphs but you can try if you want.

We start with Saturday. TV companies mean you to go out on a Saturday. Look at a TV paper. *The Munders Today?* Moon and Son? Go out.

Sunday. TV companies mean you to go to church on Sunday. Wilfully and malevolently refuse to go to church. So *Haunt Me*. So they do. Jewish mother jokes and advertising jokes. Listen, if I wanted Jewish mother and advertising jokes I'd be watching BT adverts, already.

Monday. TV companies mean you to stay in and watch television on Monday. What do you mean, there's nothing on on Mondays? This is February I'm talking about, remember? *thirtysomething* was on on Mondays in February. Everybody switches on their answerphone at ten pm on Mondays and gets out the tissues. "Michael realizes that his career at the agency is threatening his family, health and sanity." There are only two weeks to go! Fantasize briefly that Miles will finally go berserk in a kind of cool yet sinister zen sort of way and slaughter everyone except Michael. Find myself muttering the usual advice to the producers under my breath "kill Hope, kill Hope," like a mantra. "Kill Nancy" doesn't make such a good mantra but she's married to Michael for real. Sigh.

Tuesday. *Gamesmaster*. Boys' games, as Doctor Rose Marie would say (remember *A Very Peculiar Practice*, the thing Peter Davison was good in?). Yes, I know Right to Reply have done the *Gamesmaster*-is-sexist thing and I know girls don't play computer games as much as boys but has it ever occurred to you that the sexism is a cause not an effect. You have to practice, right? Listen, I'd love to have a go at *Terminator II* but I'm damned if I'm going to make my first attempt in front of all those little boys who always hog the video machines in the Empire Leicester Square and so confirm all their prejudices about women having no hand/eye co-ordination. OK, I have no hand/eye co-ordination but that doesn't mean all women are klutzes.

Eastenders. I know, but at least Tucker Jenkins has finally told Miss Brahms that he's HIV positive, thus winning the longest plot strand award for 1992, 1991...

Quantum Leap. Scott Bakula is cute but cuteness is not enough. Maybe now would be a good time for the "Sam Beckett leaps into Vietnam... Korea... Nicaragua... Cuba... (fill in your own unAmerican territory)" plot; yes, there was life outside American adolescence in the last thirty years. They must still have a few cheeseplants out back left over from *The A Team* they could use.

Wednesday. Need I say more? Or even Morse? Why can't TV be this good all the time? Er... actually this wasn't a particularly good Morse

his ex-fiancée's husband committed suicide and everyone except Morse could see that SheDunIt. Don't TV detectives know their girlfriends always either doneit or are going to dieofit?

Well, yes, there was *Star Trek: The Next Generation* earlier on, but who watches that any more? *Interzone* readers, do I hear you say? Ha, I reply. *STNG* has gone so far down hill (Where are the women? Where are the plots? Why do they only remember what the Prime Directive is when there's an R in the month?) that I defy you to write in and tell me, hand on heart, that you really do still watch it for anything except Patrick Stewart (well, all right, watsername Ms Empathy if you're of the masculine persuasion).

Drop the Dead Donkey was billed but, er, dropped; but there was the first of *The Jack Dee Show*. My goodness he's a miserable arrogant little twit, I thought. Yes, but he's also funny. John Sessions please note. Dee is also a thirtysomething; well, he remembers *Magpie*. Does that make him old enough to be Simon Dee's lovechild? If you're smiling that shows your age, sunshine.

Thursday. *Red Dwarf V*. Lads, lads. My theory is that the BBC are so ashamed that they haven't a single new science-fiction programme anywhere that they are keeping this mummified relic alive in the hope we'll mistake it for something bursting with energy instead of that vindaloo flatulence. Still, there are always the repeats of *The Crystal Maze*, which are still good for a shot of tension even though you know damn well they aren't going to get those bamboo quoits onto the hooks in the right order or else they'll run out just as soon as they get the hang of it.

Ah, but then there is always Friday. Truckers will probably still be running when you read this – it will probably still be running come the millennium since they seem to be doing it by the death of a thousand cuts method, slicing it up into a zillion little bits and then doing each sliver e-x-t-r-e-m-e-l-y s-l-o-w-l-y. *Thunderbirds*' raw energy continues to enthrall a new generation and to keep the attention of the old. Ah, how we cried as the real tears rolled down Alan Tracy's ronsealed cheek! *Dr Who*, however, appears to have lost its power to make the nation's youth quiver behind the sofa or even go I-am-a-Da-lek whilst cruising round bollards. No, I am reliably informed that the generation which had to have it explained to them on *Blue Peter* who *Dr Who* was are unimpressed. It's in black and white! You can see the sets are cheap! There is no pizza! All this and then the *Star Trek: 25th Anniversary Special*. No, I really am going to have to say it: beam me up Scottie!...

That was the week that was,

It's over, let it go.

Thunderbirds were go again

Dr Who met the usual foe again

Déjà vu, nothing new.

A continuous loop from '62!

(Wendy Bradley)

Sweated Labour?

The Women in Fantasy

Does the commercial fantasy genre – which came into being during the second half of the 1960s – “belong” to women, as both writers and readers, or is it in fact a largely male preserve? Strong arguments can be made both ways, and there is much evidence available on each side of the dispute. Most of the “founding fathers” of fantasy were indeed men, whether one looks at the scholarly/religious/nursery tradition – William Morris, Lord Dunsany, James Branch Cabell, E.R. Eddison, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, etc – or at the pulp/macho/swordswinging tradition – Robert E. Howard, Fritz Leiber, L. Sprague de Camp, Jack Vance, Poul Anderson, Michael Moorcock, etc. Moreover, most of the fantasy bestsellers of the past 20 years have also been male: Richard Adams, Piers Anthony, Stephen Donaldson, Terry Brooks, William Horwood, Raymond E. Feist, Terry Pratchett, David Eddings, David Gemmell and so on.

Unless one counts Mother Goose, or perhaps E. Nesbit, the first really significant woman writer of modern fantasy appears to have been Ursula Le Guin (although C.L. Moore [Catherine Moore] did some influential stuff in the pulps, and of course Andre Norton [Alice Mary Norton] also helped lay the groundwork). Yet one can't escape the feeling that women are the real workers in this field, its proletariat, its peasantry, its sweated labour. As evidence, I've tried to amass here the names of all the English-language female fantasy writers who published books in the past couple of decades. No doubt I've missed many, particularly newer people and those who may have hidden their gender behind male-sounding names. I've deliberately omitted a number who are in my opinion science-fiction writers, from Anne McCaffrey to Gwyneth Jones (although certain readers may perceive at least some of their work as fantasy) and I've likewise omitted some non-genre “literary” fantasists such as Emma Tennant or the late Angela Carter, plus a host of the lesser children's authors. So here's the list; those writers who have made a particularly significant contribution – in quantitative if not always in qualitative terms – are asterisked. (DP)

A list of women fantasy novelists, active in the genre within the last 25 years or so:

Lynn Abbey*	Sheila Gilluly*	Katherine Neville
Phyllis Carol Agins	Greer Ilene Gilman	Sharan Newman
Joan Aiken*	Heather Gladney	Elizabeth Norman
Karen Anderson	Molly Gloss	Andre Norton*
Eleanor Arnason	Lisa Goldstein*	Kate Novak
Constance Ash	Deborah Grabien	Jody Lynn Nye
Nancy Asire	Kathryn Grant	Diana L. Paxson*
Margaret Ball	Sharon Green	Susan Petrey
Gael Baudino*	Joyce Ballou Gregorian*	Meredith Ann Pierce
Clare Bell	P.M. Griffin (?)	Tamora Pierce
Nancy Varian Berberick	Linda Haldeman	Rachel Pollack
Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff	Barbara Hambly*	Alis A. Rasmussen
Nancy Bond	Laurell K. Hamilton	Melanie Rawn*
Elizabeth H. Boyer*	Lyndon Hardy (?)	Judith Reeves-Stevens
Marion Zimmer Bradley*	Deborah Turner Harris*	Mickey Zucker Reichert* (?)
Gillian Bradshaw	Geraldine Harris	Anne Rice*
Noel-Anne Brennan	Kathleen Herbert	J.F. Rivkin (?)
Mary Brown	Mary H. Herbert	Jennifer Roberson*
Mildred Downey Broxon	Vicki Ann Heydron	Michaela Roessner
Karen A. Brush	P.C. Hodgell	Kristine Kathryn Rusch
Emma Bull	Tanya Huff*	Michelle Sagara
Linda E. Bushyager	Jackie Hyman	Jessica Amanda Salmonson
Moyra Caldecott	Janann Jenner	Fay Sampson*
Lillian Stewart Carl	Diana Wynne Jones*	Josephine Saxton
Tonya R. Carter	Jenny Jones	Elizabeth A. Scarborough*
Joy Chant*	Brenda Jordan	Pamela F. Service
Vera Chapman	Phyllis Ann Karr	Joseph Sherman
Suzy McKee Charnas	Patricia Kennealy*	Susan Schwartz*
C.J. Cherryh*	Katharine Kerr*	Barbara Siegel
Grace Chetwin	Mary Kirchoff	Kathleen Sky
M. Lucie Chin	Rosemary Kirstein	Cheryl Smith
Jo Clayton*	Nancy Kress	Julie Dean Smith
Storm Constantine	Katherine Kurtz*	Melinda Snodgrass
Catherine Cooke	Ellen Kushner	Midori Snyder*
Louise Cooper*	Mercedes Lackey*	(Alison) Spedding
Susan Cooper*	Jeanne Larsen	Nancy Springer*
Juanita Coulson	Sanders Anne Laubenthal	Mary Stanton
Kara Dalkey	Tanith Lee*	Kathlyn S. Starbuck
Tina Danielli	Ursula Le Guin*	Laura C. Stevenson
Lyndan Darby (?)	Megan Lindholm*	Deborah Talmadge-Bickmore
Grania Davis	Morgan Llywelyn	Judith Tarr*
Pamela Dean	Anne Logston	Sheri S. Tepper*
Carol A. Dennis	Jean Lorrach	Anne Thackery
Susan Dexter	Elizabeth A. Lynn*	Gail Van Asten
Carole Nelson Douglas*	R.A. MacAvoy*	Alida Van Gores
Ann Downer	Patricia A. McKillip*	Paula Volsky*
Diane Duane*	Robin McKinley*	Evangeline Walton*
Teresa Edgerton	Margaret Mahy	Freda Warrington*
Claudia J. Edwards	Laurie J. Marks (?)	Lyn Webster
Phyllis Eisenstein*	Lori Martin	Margaret Weis*
Ru Emerson*	Adrienne Martine-Barnes	Cherry Wilder
Carol Emshwiller	Julian May	Nancy Willard
Rose Estes	Ardath Mayhar	Connie Willis
Penelope Farmer	Shirley Meier	Bridget Wood
Pauline Fisk	Sandra Miesel	Persia Woolley
Elizabeth Forest	Faren Miller	Patricia C. Wrede*
Cheryl J. Franklin	Marlys Millhiser	Patricia Wrightson*
Esther M. Friesner*	Elizabeth Moon*	Janny Wurts*
Jane Gaskell*	C.L. Moore*	Jonathan Wylie* (half)
Patricia Geary	Janet E. Morris*	Chelsea Quinn Yarbrow
Mary Gentle*	Pat Murphy	Jane Yolen*
	Dwina Murphy-Gibb	

The occasional question marks indicate some doubt as to an author's identity/gender. Comments, corrections and additions are welcomed!

The Dumpster

Ken Wisman

The smiling midget with the terrible toupé was just the first unusual thing associated with Dempsters Dumpsters.

The little man barged into John Roberts' condo at Peach Blossom Condominiums, shook John Roberts' hand vigorously, then darted around bouncing from object to object.

"Nice couch! Nice lamp! Nice plants!" the midget said with a faint accent.

"I – uh – thanks," John Roberts said, not sure how to take the little man. "You're Dempsters Dumpsters' service rep I take it?"

"Oh yes, indeed!"

It was 7 a.m., and John was still in his pyjamas. "You're early – uh."

"Gorblix." The midget paused to admire the framed photo of an attractive woman. "Women – you can't live with him, and you can't live without him."

John suddenly remembered Marcia in the bedroom. It wouldn't do his status any good if it got out that his girlfriend was sleeping over.

"Not to worry," Gorblix said. "I am the heart of discretion."

John shook his head, trying to clear it of the uncomfortable feeling that his thoughts had just been read. He decided not to prolong the bizarre interview. "Mr Gorblix, I'm Peach Blossom Condominium's business manager. I'm responsible for seeing that the grounds are kept, the snow is ploughed, and that the outsides of the condos are painted. The complex pays me to make the best decisions regarding contractors. If needs aren't met, I'm called. Night or day. And I don't like to be disturbed."

"There are only two guarantees in this life," Gorblix said. "The first is death in Texas. The second is that Dempsters Dumpsters will give you the shirt off its back."

He fetched his briefcase, scurried back and produced a contract.

"If not fully satisfied with Dempsters Dumpsters, we will doubly refund money paid. Additionally, Dempsters Dumpsters will pay – for one full year – cost of any company that is deemed okay."

John Roberts wavered. He had never seen such an offer. "I'll have to have our lawyer check it over."

Gorblix smiled. "I think we will be doing business."

"Perhaps," John Roberts said. "Perhaps."

"Can you believe that guy?" John said to Marcia over eggs and bacon.

"I smell a story idea," Marcia said. "I think you should go with Dempster."

"Easy for you to say. But if they screw up it's me the three hundred denizens of this complex are going to call. Which reminds me, it's almost eight –"

"And I should be slipping out like a thief," Marcia said, but with a smile.

"Believe me, if anyone finds the littlest excuse to complain they will. They think they own me. But it's a good job. I get plenty of spare time to do my novel writing – provided everyone at Peach Blossom is content."

"Content?" Marcia said teasingly. "Did I hear content?" She rose and sat in John's lap. She dramatically opened his pyjama top.

"Don't start anything we can't finish," John said weakly.

Marcia kissed him with mock passion, but her teasing soon became serious. With a sigh, John rose and led Marcia back to the bedroom.

A half hour later, John rolled over and glanced at the clock.

"I know," Marcia said. "Appearances."

"There's a way around all this," John shot back. "Marry me."

He was serious. So serious, he asked her a dozen times a day. They were perfectly compatible (John reasoned). She a writer of mysteries – being self-supporting on royalties alone; he of science fiction – also a good one if not, as yet, self-supporting.

"Here's the deal," Marcia said half facetiously. "We come up with an idea we can collaborate on, a science-fiction/mystery, and we'll get hitched."

"Great," John said. "I've got writer's block."

Marcia rolled out of bed. "I'm between ideas myself. If you go with that Gorblix guy, let me know."

"You read too much Nancy Drew as a kid," John said. "*The Mystery of the Dippy Dumpster*."

Marcia kissed him on the forehead. "I have a suspicious nature."

"I love you," John said.

Marcia skipped to the door. "I'll let myself out."

John drove into Cambridge to drop off the Dempsters Dumpster contract and returned home. The lawyer called at three.

"I'll advise going with Dempsters Dumpsters," he told John Roberts.

"They're a little – strange," John protested.

"I'll say they are," the lawyer said. "You almost hope they fail. You'd save a fortune."

John hung up. He had to make a quick decision. He had fired the last contractor for failing to make pick-ups twice in a row. The refuse was building; the complaints were also piling up. He dialled Gorblix's number.

"Mr Roberts!" Gorblix said with his unmistakable accent.

"How'd you know it was me?" John said, startled.

"I am guessing? No matter. You wish to use our company."

For the sixth time John hesitated. "The fact of the matter is there's already a stack of bags –"

"Oh, excellent!" Gorblix exclaimed in rapture. "I will sort through it personally." He hung up.

John called Marcia. "I decided to try Dempster."

"John, I smell a mystery."

"Hey, Gorblix is a foreigner. Gets his colloquialisms mixed up. No big deal."

"I'll be there in fifteen."

John's condo overlooked the dumpsters' holding port, which was carved out of a copse of pines. Marcia watched from the side window. A truck appeared. It was big and green. A dumpster swung from two heavy hooks at the rear.

"Gorblix is driving," Marcia whispered.

"Manpower shortage," John said. He sat reading behind her.

"He's backing in, lowering the dumpster –"

"He's a hitman for the Syndicate from the Wonderful Land of Oz."

"Let's go outside."

Unobserved, they walked toward the dumpster port where Gorblix was leaning over a plastic bag of trash. Gorblix was chuckling delightedly. He cinched up the bag and lovingly placed it in the dumpster's open side panel.

John cleared his throat. Gorblix jumped two feet.

"When are you going to deliver the others?" John asked.

"Others?" Gorblix said, adjusting his red wig.

"Dumpsters."

"Uh – one isn't enough?"

John looked at the dumpster – six feet wide, ten feet long, seven feet tall. "The other outfit had three dumpsters. There's a hundred families at Peach Blossom –"

Gorblix moaned. "They never prepared me. And I'm running all afoul of the language. Look at you. You're already suspicious."

Marcia felt an unaccountable urge to help the midget. "Maybe – maybe your employer intends on doing three times as many pick-ups?" she suggested.

John shot a quick glance at Marcia. She shrugged.

Gorblix looked hopefully at John. "Does that sound reasonable to you?"

"What? Yeah, I guess –"

Gorblix looked delighted. "Then that's what will be done."

"Sure," John nodded. "As for cleaning up the area, one of the local kids –"

"Please," Gorblix said, his eyes sparkling. "I would enjoy the doing. Is this the lovely girlfriend who graces your mantel with her single-dimensional image?" Gorblix said.

"Uh – yeah."

"Hello," Marcia said.

"It is true what is said about women? That they are like streetcars – the sea is full of them."

"Right," John said. He took hold of Marcia's arm and led her away.

"I'm going to follow him," Marcia said.

She and John sat at the dining table sipping coffee.

"Who might that be, sweets?" John asked in mock seriousness.

"Want to come?"

"I've got to go check out a roofer in Brookline. Two of the units on Blossom Drive are leaking. Come back later?"

Marcia raised an eyebrow. "You're insatiable."

"I reserved *Alien* at Video Signals. We can have a pizza."

"I'll come, but I won't stay. I feel an outline coming on and want to get an early start."

"Hey, if we were married –"

"Later, John," Marcia said and skipped out.

John spent an hour more than he wanted in Brookline and came home at seven. He found Marcia at the window facing the dumpster port.

"He rode in circles," she said without turning.

"Through Acton, West Acton, Littleton, Harvard. Around and around until he lost me."

John shrugged. "Given his usual state of confusion he was probably lost. You want pepperoni on your pie?"

"That's not all," Marcia said. "Noises have been coming from the dumpster."

John went to the phone, dialled for New London Pizza. "What kind of noises?" he asked distractedly.

"Snaps, pops and crackles."

"Someone dumped a load of Rice Krispies?"

"People have been phoning. Complaining. I could hear them on your recording machine."

John groaned. "Let's take a walk."

They walked into the dumpster port. Everything looked okay. John slid the side door-panel open. The container was loaded with fat, normal garbage bags. He slammed the panel shut, shot a look at Marcia and wagged his eyebrows.

Marcia grinned and lifted the heavy lid covering the front of the container. A soft electrical crackling rose from deep inside. Then a popping like a cork gun. Finally, a high-pitched whistling filled the container – a sound like a falling bomb.

"You didn't tell me about the high-pitched whistling," John said weakly.

Marcia dropped the lid with a bang.

Once again, John dialled the number of Dempsters Dumpster.

"Ah, you call in thanks for our fine services," Gorblix said.

John ignored the midget's prescience. "Actually, there's strange sounds issuing from –"

"Oh, no!" Gorblix said. "I forgot switch adjustment."

"Switch?"

There was a long pause. "Uh – yes. For signalling device."

"Signalling device?"

"Uh – it tells me when dumpster is full. It is a reasonable explanation?"

"Do you think you can adjust it so that it doesn't make so much noise?"

"Tonight! In a jiffy!" Gorblix hung up.

Shortly after John told Marcia that Gorblix would return that night, she made a move to leave.

"Just remember," John said, "married writers make exceptionally good relationships. They share the same disappointments and aspirations. Take Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance –"

"Invite them over for dinner, and we'll talk about it," Marcia said. She gave John a peck. "I'll let myself out."

Marcia was in her apartment in Littleton by ten. She knew she could return to Peach Blossom safely by 11:30. John, an obsessive compulsive, was in bed and asleep by then.

She loved him all right. He was a grounding for her impulsiveness. Right now John was changing into his pyjamas; next he would brush his teeth; last he would settle in for precisely 27 minutes of reading.

Marcia made coffee, drank three cups to prepare for a long night. She got into her car and drove back to Peach Blossom parking her car in the farthest corner of the complex. Then she stole through the shadows along Blossom Drive and slipped into the dumpster port.

Marcia pressed her ear to the side of the dumpster. A low, muffled snapping followed by loud pops reverberated. She slid the side panel open. It was a hot August night; Marcia steeled herself before poking her head inside. The smell was not unpleasant – in fact it was mild, like vanilla with a hint of disinfectant.

Marcia lifted out bags of garbage. She cleared a space nearly to the bottom and was leaning into the dumpster, when she heard the truck. Headlights lit the area; it was too late to run.

Marcia dove inside.

She scrunched amongst the bags, suddenly feeling the overwhelming need to pee. She cursed the three cups of coffee.

The truck pulled into the port, parked. A door opened, slammed shut. A bag of garbage came flying through the side panel and fell on Marcia's legs.

"Yuck," she whispered.

Several more bags flew in, burying her. The side panel banged shut. Then the dumpster filled with soft, blue light.

Marcia squirmed. The temperature was rising.

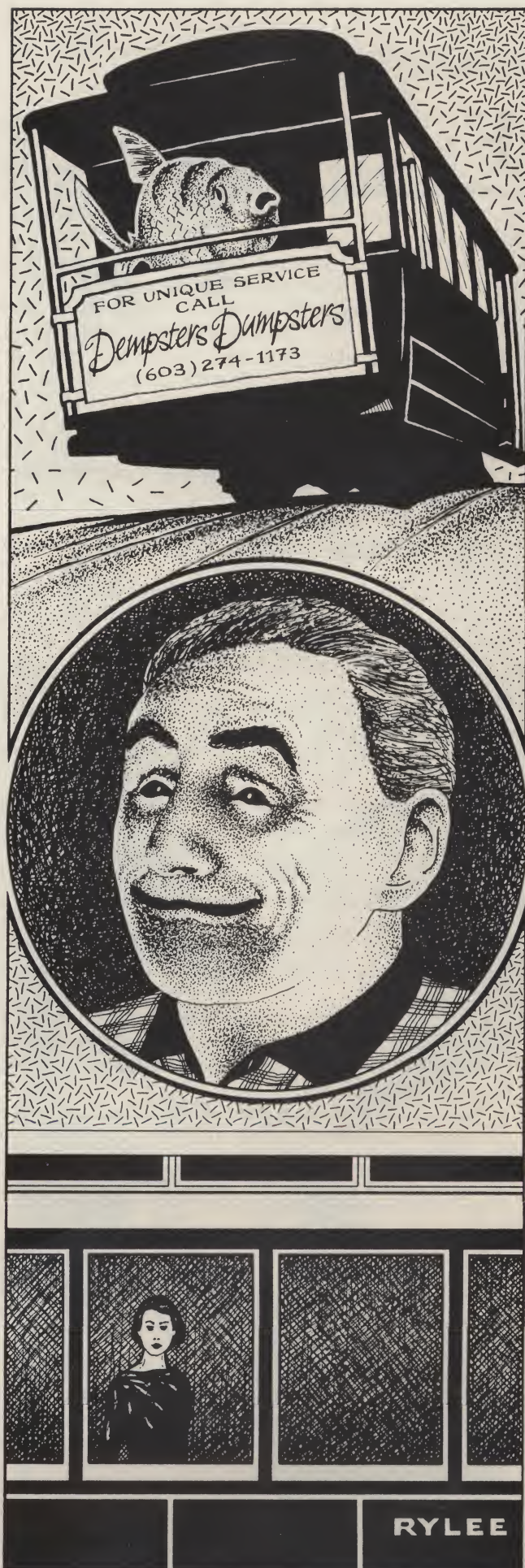
"Omigod!" Marcia exclaimed with sudden revelation. "He's going to use some sort of blue, incinerating ray."

She scrambled through the slippery plastic.

"Hey!" Marcia shouted. "Let me out! There's a mistake!"

But a high-pitched shriek drowned her shouts. Then, just as her fingertips touched the metal of the side panel, a soft explosion shook the dumpster, and the bottom fell out of Marcia's world.

Tumbling over and over in slow motion – with four



Illustrations by Michael Reilly

dozen garbage bags for companions – Marcia had the strange thought that she was Alice falling through the looking glass.

For two days John tried to call Marcia. On the third day he drove past her apartment in Littleton, checked the lot for her car. He wasn't overly concerned when he couldn't find it. It wouldn't be the first time in their two-year relationship that Marcia up and disappeared.

There was the time that she called him – after a week's absence – from the White Mountains of New Hampshire to say that she was rock climbing. She claimed that the impulses came on when she was on the brink of an idea. The New Hampshire incident actually led to a bestseller: *Murder on the Rocks*.

John's first wife was impulsive like Marcia. John spent three years of their ill-fated marriage trying to change her, imposing order on what he viewed as her "disordered life." He wasn't about to make the same mistake with Marcia.

He sat tight – until he got the phone call.

"Mr Roberts, this is Phyllis Greenmeyer in Peach Blossom IV."

"What can I do for you, Mrs Greenmeyer?"

"There's a strange car that's been in our lot the past few days. It doesn't belong to any of the neighbours."

A tiny bell went off in John's head. "I'll swing by right away."

John's mind went a mile a minute as he walked along Blossom Drive.

What if it was Marcia's car? What then? Call the police?

John imagined himself explaining: "The midget is your prime suspect, officer."

And the officer answering: "Why's that?"

"His dumpsters make noise, and he has this red toupé, and he thinks that women are like fish. There's one along every minute."

"Perhaps you should come downtown, Mr Roberts. There's a very nice doctor that we'd like you to explain it all to."

By the time John reached the lot and confirmed that it was indeed Marcia's car, he was convinced that the police should not be called – not until he conducted his own investigation.

Thus, at ten pm, John donned dark clothing, got a flashlight and stole out to the dumpster port. He found a comfortable spot in the bushes and waited. But as the time ticked past eleven, John's eyelids drooped.

By 11:30 he was asleep.

The soft explosion at three a.m. woke him.

John opened his eyes to a strange, blue glow pulsating around the dumpster. He got up, approached. The side panel was open. Plastic bags filled with garbage spilled out.

Suddenly, the trash disappeared.

"Of course, I could be dreaming," John said.

The sliding panel faded and a door faded in. John touched the door, which swung open. He stabbed his flashlight down. The lightbeam was lost in a bottomless shaft of darkness.

"A weird dream," John said.

He noticed a line of rungs in the wall.

He climbed onto the rungs and started down. He came to a thin, swirling mist of blue light. John passed

through the mist, which made his skin tingle.

When his head had sunk below the mist, the rungs to which he clung lurched and fell. Faster and faster John plummeted. He closed his eyes in panic as the wind shrieked through his pants legs.

John peeked. Below, a bluish dot of light approached at an alarming speed. He counted off the seconds. At seven he felt slowing; at ten he was in the blue light; at twelve he had stopped.

John stood in a round "room" a hundred yards across. The room was surrounded by a "wall" of swirling darkness cut by streaks of silent lighting. John couldn't look too long at the wall. It made him giddy, and his mind pulled back instinctively denying its existence.

John stepped backward and stumbled over a stack of stuffed trash bags. He was just wondering where his dream would take him next, when a robot silently rolled up and grabbed a bag. The robot rolled silently away. John followed.

The robot brought the bag to two smaller, stationary robots. They had delicate metal hands and fingers with which they sorted through the trash. They held each object in front of an electric eye. If the object was salvageable, a disinfectant squirted from a tube, repairs were effected, and the object was placed in one of several piles. If the object was deemed unacceptable, the robot dropped it into a pit of blue fire.

John examined the piles. Plastic objects – bleach bottles, felt tip pens, children's toys, bathtub curtains – made up one heap. Reading materials – fat, Sunday papers with glossy magazines; paperback horror, romance, and detective novels; mail circulars – comprised another pile. Still another pile contained old bureaus, tables, rugs.

The robots had restored each object, sealing bottles, mending pages. Radios, TVs and stereos looked brand new.

John was examining the tin can pile, when the rolling robot came up behind, grasped him delicately by the back of the arms and gave him to one of the stationary robots. John's flashlight was taken from him, his clothes were stripped off.

The flashlight went to a pile of mechanical devices; his sweatshirt and pants to a clothes pile. But the robot was in a quandary about John. It kept examining him with its electric eye. Then it handed John over to the robot next to it.

The robot sprayed him with mist, which smelled like vanilla and disinfectant, and put him with the TVs and radios. Done with the sorting, the robots shut down and floated into the darkness above.

From his point in the room's centre, John saw a bright, white light appear across the room where the "wall" met the "floor." Apparently, the floor was dissolving, exposing light from below.

The hole opened under the first pile of sorted objects – the plastic – and they floated down like feathers. The second pile – the clothing – went next, fluttering like butterflies.

John moved back.

The opening crept ineluctably past the centre of the sorting room. "Time to wake up," John said, slapping himself in desperation.

He backed to where the rungs hung suspended in

space. John grabbed the metal just as the floor dissolved beneath him. He swore he saw a world below – something green, maybe grass; an object, possibly a tree.

The rungs lurched. The white circle of light receded – faster and faster. Wind screamed around John's head.

The rungs slowed, stopped with a mechanical snap. The dumpster door swung open. John stumbled out. When he turned, the door was gone, replaced by the sliding panel.

John, naked, shivered in the evening air. He sprinted into his condo, collapsed in bed. "Funny dream," he said, falling back into an exhausted sleep.

But hours later John woke reeking – of vanilla and disinfectant.

"Mr Gorblix, Marcia is gone," John said into the phone.

"Ah, but women are like fish – the streetcars are filled with them."

"Mr Gorblix, she fell down your hole."

Silence.

"Mr Gorblix, I am a science-fiction writer. I know precisely what you are up to." In actuality, John didn't have the faintest idea. "I'm sure the police would like to know as well."

"Please, no. I will surely lose my job –"

"What about Marcia, Mr Gorblix?"

"Her presence there puts the entire universe in jeopardy."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that," John said.

"Oh, dear."

"Pull yourself together, Gorblix. We can get her out." John paused. "Can't we?"

"I do not want to be the bott remembered for tearing asunder the delicate fabric of the universe. I must go alone –"

"Together."

"Midnight, then. No witnesses."

Gorblix came at the stroke of twelve. "You do not know what distress I am in. It was, as you say, a 'setup' for me to fail. I was not properly prepared – the language, you know. The pick-ups, the tunnel, the switch settings –"

"Calm down," John said. "Who set you up?"

Gorblix pulled off his nose to reveal a smooth, featureless face. "I'm a bott, lab grown. I was a servant to a rich family. We botts were emancipated when it was proven that we could feel. But we still need assimilation to society. Work normal jobs –"

"What the hell are you talking about?" John asked.

"Politics."

"I'm not interested in your life story. I want Marcia back."

"You shouldn't have come. If you were stranded –"

"Let's go."

Nervous, Gorblix led the way to the dumpster. He manipulated a series of invisible controls at the rear. Snaps, pops and crackles rose from inside; the door appeared.

John opened it, climbed down with Gorblix close behind. The rungs dropped, and John gritted his teeth. The second trip wasn't any better – if anything, it was worse.

They got off in the sorting room.



"What're the robots doing?" John asked.

"Preparing things for sale."

John picked up a *Sunday Boston Globe*. "Big bucks I'm sure for a paper one week old."

"In actuality that will net – but currency exchange would mean nothing. It is an astronomical sum of great proportions."

"You're a junk dealer."

Gorblix rose to his full height. "Antiques," he said with dignity.

The sorting robots shut down, floated up. The floor began dissolving.

"What's next?" John asked.

"Float with antiques." To illustrate, Gorblix stepped over the edge into the light. He fell like a feather. "Come."

"What the hell," John said.

And he stepped into space.

The trip was pleasant, like falling through a vat of down.

John alighted on a soft, fragrant carpet of grass that grew with perfect precision – each blade the same size and spaced equidistantly. Likewise, the trees were perfectly symmetrical with flawless, triangular leaves.

A deer-like animal gazed by in slow motion, its horns made of rainbow crystal.

"Where are we?" John whispered.

"A garden," Gorblix said.

"What planet?"

"Earth."

"Not the one I know."

The objects from the sorting room rained around them. Several robots gathered up the objects, brought them to a white pavilion made from a material as delicate as butterfly wings.

"We fell through a time – what? Hole? Warp?"

"Tunnel," Gorblix said.

"This is earth. Future earth."

"Truly. The year is – ah, but it would have no meaning."

"You keep saying that."

Gorblix walked to the pavilion where the robots arranged objects onto pedestals.

John entered and poked a bottle of Chlorox bleach. "Worth a fortune, right?"

"Scarcity sets price. Plastic comes from oil as by-product. Oil shall not last forever."

"I get the picture. But why not just buy the stuff?"

"Because of laws affecting time continuum, of course. Is not known fully what damage it can do to remove something from one time to another. Unless –"

"Yes?"

"Unless, that object is destined for junk heap. Your dumping grounds will be dug up for artefacts. We antique agents improve on process wherein discarded objects arrive in future."

"Which reminds me – where's Marcia?"

At that moment a shadow fell across the pavilion. A tremendous cumulus cloud with jutting towers and spires floated over. Seven tiny dots fell from the cloud and floated gently down.

The seven dots resolved themselves to figures that alighted as gracefully as songbirds in front of the pavilion.

They were completely bald – no hair on their heads or faces – and it wasn't easy to tell the difference between the sexes. They stood seven feet tall, were wispy thin and dressed in something sheer from head to foot.

Bald angels, John thought.

The seven figures filed past Gorblix and John. Each nodded to Gorblix and said something in a beautiful, melodic voice. They dispersed throughout the pavilion where they burst into delighted song.

"They passed by like I didn't exist," John said.

"They do not want to show interest," Gorblix said cryptically.

John observed as one of the women stood before a bright yellow-and-red box of TIDE. Her fingers tentatively approached the box and drew back. John recalled having a similar response to a Tiffany lamp.

"The Collectors love your war-filled newspapers and violent novels. Your savage Twentieth Century is most sought after."

"Lucky us."

One of the men drifted idly over to Gorblix and addressed the midget. From their casual voices John guessed that they were discussing some trivialities – the weather, the high rents in the cloud castle. The man nodded in John's direction. A more serious discussion ensued.

The man drifted away.

"What was that all about?" John whispered.

"He wanted to buy you."

"What kind of people are they?"

"You put gorillas in zoos, don't you?"

"Are you saying I'm like a gorilla to them?"

Gorblix grinned.

"Never mind. Let's find Marcia."

"I'll have to explain that she wasn't part of the last shipment." Gorblix turned and sang to the nearest figure, who listened and closed her eyes. "Telepathic," Gorblix said to John. "She's having Marcia brought down."

Moments later, three dots dropped from the cloud.

"They must have one hell of an advanced science," John said.

"No science. They formed city with their minds."

The three figures approached – two of the bald angels flanking a taut-faced, but healthy Marcia.

Marcia ran to John, and hugged him as though she would never let go.

"John, they have no sex here," she said. "Let's go home and have sex."

"Every man's dream of a reunion," John said.

"They thought I smelled absolutely terrible, like an animal."

"The future result of all those deodorant and mouthwash ads," John said.

The nine bald angels crowded around singing to each other, observing John and Marcia.

"Shoo!" John said.

The bald angels moved off rustling like leaves.

"Let us depart," Gorblix said.

Marcia took the top position on the rungs followed by John and Gorblix.

"They have no pregnancy!" Marcia shouted through the shrieking wind. "I mean they have this android thing that takes donor eggs and

sperm! John, I want to have a baby!"

John ungritted his teeth (he hated this part of the trip most of all). "Can we wait a few minutes on that one?"

"There's no meat either! I want a cheeseburger first thing!"

"What would you like to do first?" John called up. "Have a cheeseburger, sex or the baby?"

The ladder decelerated, clicked to a halt. Marcia exited the dumpster, followed by John. She captured him in a bone-crushing embrace.

"I missed you," Marcia said. "I thought I'd never see you again. I made a promise that if I ever got out I'd marry you."

"What about our collaboration?"

"If you were to ask me," Gorblix piped up. "Marcia wishes this collaboration as an assurance."

They stared at the midget.

"We botts are made to be children's companions. We read minds a little and understand some psychology. Marcia is afraid to marry because it might interfere with her writing career."

"Sigmund Gorblix," John said.

"Collaborating on book is symbolic act – creation of creative child. It would affirm writing bond between you."

"You're beautiful," John said. He led the way into the condo where they sat at the dining table. John went off to fetch the champagne he had been saving for the occasion.

While Gorblix was alone with Marcia, he said, "Is difficult age for women. All that socialization and biology versus the need for self-development."

"He's the best shot I have, you know," Marcia said. "Being a writer, he understands me."

John returned with two brimming glasses.

"We'll write that novel together –" John began.

"I know," Marcia said. "I saw it."

"Huh?"

"It was on one of the Collectors' shelves. *The Dumpster* by John Roberts and Jane Simms."

"You read it?"

Marcia shook her head. "I wanted the pleasure and pain of doing it together – from scratch."

Gorblix cleared his throat. "Fiction, I hope?"

"Names and places will change to protect your job."

"Where will you go?" John said.

"Back a little in time. Before you knew me."

"Listen," John said. "Let me give you a few tips on how to run a business. And I've got a stack of old English grammars."

He went off to find them. And when Gorblix left at dawn he was laden with books. John and Marcia followed him outside.

Marcia knelt and hugged the midget. "Thank you."

"Anyway," John said. "Good luck."

Gorblix scrambled aboard the truck, leaned out the window and winked. "Good-bye, John Roberts. And if it doesn't work out between you and Marcia you know what they say about women –"

"Women are like fish," Marcia said.

"The streetcars are full of them," John finished.

Waving, Gorblix drove off.

Ken Wisman has contributed to *Interzone* once before, way back in issue 21 ("The Philosopher's Stone"). He is beginning to make a name for himself in his native America as a skilful crafter of light sf and fantasy stories.

FOR SALE

The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction by David Pringle (with assistance from Ken Brown). Hardcover edition, Grafton, 1990. A guide to some 3,000 sf titles, described by the *Oxford Times* as "among the four or five most useful books published in this field in the last two decades." It sold quite well and there are just 90 copies left. We are selling these to IZ readers at less than half the original price of £16.95 – £8 inc. p & p (£10 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

Interzone: The 2nd Anthology. Paperback edition, New English Library, 1988. Stories by J.G. Ballard, Gregory Benford, Thomas M. Disch, Garry Kilworth, Paul J. McAuley, Kim Newman, Rachel Pollack, John Shirley & Bruce Sterling, Brian Stableford, Ian Watson and others – fine tales which the *Times* described as having "the quality of going right to the edge of ideas which can chill as well as warm." It's now officially out of print, but we have obtained some remainder copies for resale to IZ readers at just over half the original cover price – £1.75 (including postage & packing; £2.75 overseas; \$5 USA).

Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare. A monograph by David Pringle, Borgo Press, 1979. Covers all Ballard's work from "The Violent Noon" in 1951 up to the eve of publication of *The Unlimited Dream Company* in 1979. Still in print in the USA but long hard to obtain in Britain. Now copies are available from *Interzone* at £3.50 each (including postage & packing; £4.50 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

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The Nature of the Beast

Stan Nicholls talks to Terry Brooks

Terry Brooks knows what he wants. "I'm not interested in being critically reviewed, and I don't care if I win any awards. What I want is every man, woman and child in the country to buy my books, read them and love them. If I can do that I feel I've accomplished as much as I could possibly want to accomplish. The ringing of cash registers is music to my ears."

That music has been a constant background since 1977 when the first of his fantasies, *The Sword of Shannara*, topped the bestseller lists, and his subsequent novels have performed equally well, making him one of the field's most bankable assets. So was his decision to write fantasy purely commercial? "No. I wanted to do the kinds of adventure stories that Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson had done. That was the kind of story I enjoyed, so it was the kind of story I wanted to tell. Also I didn't see much of that sort of thing being written. So from that point of view it was somewhat pragmatic."

"But I needed to find a different form in which to couch it. I couldn't be telling *Ivanhoe* again; I didn't have the kind of background or sensibility to be able to deal with that. Besides, it had been told and I didn't want to do the same thing. So I took the Tolkien mode and adapted it to the European adventure story, and tried to write that first book with those two frameworks in mind."

Even if he had no guaranteed audience for his work, he contends, he would still be writing fantasy. "I write exactly what I want to write. I know authors who write to the market, and to a certain extent I think a writer is a fool if he's not aware of who and what his readership is, but I basically write the stories I love. Occasionally, somebody says, 'Would you like to write something different?' I say, 'No, I don't feel I have a need to vindicate myself.' I still have things I want to do in this area, so why change?"

"But I would like to expand the kinds of stories I do. The reason I took off from the *Shannara* series into the *Magic Kingdom* series was to avoid becoming too stale. I think periodically a writer has to do that. But I would always write in the fantasy area in

some form or another." His recent novelization of Steven Spielberg's film *Hook* is a result of this desire to expand his range.

Whatever the form, however, writing was the only thing he ever really wanted to do. "I wrote a science-fiction novel when I was in high school, which was around three hundred pages and pretty dreadful; I did a lot of different things like that, just experimentation, trying to find something that fit. And I've always admired writers. I think writers are the most accomplished people, and I'm still amazed at the things they can do with words."

Yet his first career was as a lawyer. "Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time! I made two decisions: one, I was not prepared to starve to death trying to be a writer, because I had a sense that it was not going to be easy. Two, being a lawyer in the States at that time still had good connotations. You could go into it with a very enthusiastic, idealistic approach. You could help people and do useful things. That was before Watergate and before all those political ramifications fell upon the heads of lawyers everywhere. It was also the kind of profession where I felt I could keep my writing going at the same time."

In fact he began writing *The Sword of Shannara* while he was studying law, but had no idea what an immense task he had taken on. "It took six or seven years, which was entirely too long. I wrote the first half of it while I was in law school, and shortly after that, when I was first in practice. Then I put it aside for a year. When I came back to it I decided it was awful and rewrote the whole thing. Then I wrote the second half and after that rewrote it all again. It suffered in comparison because of the passage of time and because I was still learning how to be a writer."

"Any first novelist has to learn a lot of hard lessons along the way, and I was still learning those lessons. I learnt a lot more, I'm sorry to say, later on, because after I submitted it and it was accepted I rewrote much of it under editorial direction also, which was a two-year process. So there was an

awful lot of trial and error involved."

That adds up to the best part of a decade. Presumably he works much faster now? "Oh yes, it's a book a year now. But it becomes like any other job. I talk to people about writing all the time and many of them have the idea that it depends on being inspired, that great ideas occur to you in the dead of night and you rush to the typewriter and frantically write them down. But of course the practical side of it is that if you're writing commercial fiction, which is what I'm doing, rather than literary fiction, quote unquote, you produce at a regular rate. That means you have to write every day. Or at least you have to write on a regular schedule. You write on good days and bad days, and some days the magic works better than it does other days, but if you're good enough, and you're a professional, you'll have an even keel that you maintain when writing under any kind of circumstances."

When it came to getting the book published, Brooks was lucky enough to avoid the usual round of publisher's rejections. "Most of the writers I know, and most of the stories you hear, involve many, many rejections and long hours of agonizing. But I was fortunate. I lived very much a sterile existence in a little town in the midwest with no real knowledge of the publishing industry. Consequently I went down to my local bookstore, picked up a copy of *Writers' Market*, read that through, then looked at the book racks to see who was publishing what. I saw Ballantine Books was doing Tolkien so I assumed immediately that was not a good publisher to send it to. They already had Tolkien, what would they want with somebody else? So I sent it to DAW Books."

"At that time it was an eight hundred plus page manuscript. Donald Wollheim, who was DAW's chief, had the book for about six months. Finally he sent it back saying, 'It's too big. Why don't you try Ballantine Books? Judy Lynn del Rey has just come in over there and I think she'll be interested.' I sent it to them and Lester del Rey, her husband, had not even signed on yet but he said it was the book he wanted to do as the inaugural title for their

line. I was in the right place at the right time.

"I was an English major in college and had four years post-high school work in which I concentrated on English and Greek literature. I took some creative writing courses but I would say they taught me next to nothing. My real education began when Lester del Rey became my editor. What I know about writing today, in the sense of how to tell a story and how to develop things, he taught me. In the first two books particularly, through the editing process, I discovered a tremendous amount about how to be a professional writer.

"A good editor, if a writer's willing to take direction, can teach an enormous amount, and Lester del Rey is one of the best. He gave me an insight into why stories work or why they don't work, and how not to make the kinds of errors that writers tend to make all too frequently. You write in such a vacuum that after a while you lose perspective. A good editor can give you that outside perspective and feedback that says, 'You can do better than this,' or 'This doesn't work because...'"

Almost as soon as *The Sword of Shannara* appeared it proved phenomenally successful. "It was the first trade paperback ever to feature on the New York Times bestseller list," Brooks remembers, "and it was on there for twenty-six weeks. It's funny, but at the time that didn't mean very much to me. I had no idea what the Times bestseller list was. I thought you probably got on it as a matter of course. I didn't understand and appreciate as I do now how much that meant."

Was the book originally conceived as the beginning of a series? "It's difficult to say now. Subconsciously it must have been part of my thinking that if it was successful I would do others. But I did not write that book with a sequel specifically in mind. I wrote it as an individual story. I did that with the first three books really, without thinking, 'There'll be another after this.'

"There are two forces at work here. Yes, I do want to sit down and tell just one story; that's why each of the first three *Shannara* books is its own complete story. On the other hand there are concepts in your imaginary world that require more than one book to fully develop. The nature of the beast is such that fantasy lends itself to series. And readers like series. Once you get them into that world they don't want you to leave and not come back. They want you to develop further stories. So you do have some incentive to go with that."

Surprisingly perhaps, it was 1986 before he felt able to give up law and take to writing full-time. At which point he began to fully appreciate the



Terry Brooks

importance, for him, of working to a planned structure. "I'm a big advocate of the outline school, as opposed to the write off the top of your head school, and when I do a book I spend a lot of time beforehand sketching out my characters. I outline chapter by chapter the action and the pacing, and work out all the details of how it's going to be before committing it to pen and ink. Or computer I should say these days.

"When I have that framework in place I can go to work on the book, and the changes that inevitably come when you start to do the actual building of the story you can do. But you still have that schematic to work from so that you don't have to think about everything all the way through and write yourself into corners that are difficult to get out of. Not planning wouldn't work for two minutes with me.

"When talking to would-be writers, I always recommend this as a way to get around the kinds of blocks you are otherwise likely to run into. Very few writers can think the story through as they go along without getting into trouble. I would point to the books out there in the field and say read them and tell me how many of them disappoint you, that make you think, 'What

was the writer thinking of here?' There are so many examples of bad pacing, weak endings and places where they don't pull all the threads together properly. A reader will pick that up much quicker than you think, and you owe it to them not to leave those threads dangling and make them frustrated with what you've done.

"I keep all my outlines, and I can go back and read my own stuff when it's necessary to see what I've done and why. A lot of what I do is generation skipping of course, from book to book, so I'm not dealing with the same characters. That gets a bit tedious for me, and it's a bit unrealistic for the reader. The problem with the Tarzan stories for example is that he kept having all of these adventures over and over again. You may have one great adventure in your life. If you're very lucky, or very unlucky, you will have two. But you're not likely to have numerous ones. Very few people do. If the characters in the *Shannara* books are representative of Everyman then they shouldn't be having too many things happen to them in one lifetime. It becomes unbelievable when you start to do that.

"My editor says fantasy is the hardest

kind of writing to do because whereas it's totally devoid of connection with this world – it's non here and now, it's timeless and placeless – still the reader must find it immediately identifiable for it to work properly. So the behaviour of the characters, the actions and the evolution of things has to be logical, and it has to make the reader say, 'Yes, this is what I would do if I were in this particular person's shoes.' You can't just use *deus ex machina* to solve everything, otherwise people are going to throw up their hands and say, 'This is nonsense.'

The reasons put forward for the current wide appeal of fantasy, Brooks argues, are usually too simplistic and all-embracing. "It's difficult to analyse, first of all, because we try to categorize things. There are so many different kinds of writing being done that it's hard to talk about fantasy writing as if there was only one form. There are different appeals attached to each kind of fantasy too. You have the Conan the Barbarian kind of fantasy writing, which has a very recognizable form and an obvious appeal, but at the other end of the spectrum you have things that are a lot more subtle, refined and involved.

"If we're going to talk about my writing specifically, I think its popularity lies in the fact that I'm good at telling stories, number one. I believe I can keep a reader interested for 500 pages. Also, the kind of work I'm doing is basically a re-telling of European adventure stories, as I said earlier, and there's an innate interest in that kind of thing that in many cases isn't being fulfilled by any other form. Then again, the kind of fantasy I do incorporates a lot of the elements of other fields. There's an element of horror, an element of mystery, and an element of romance. They all tend to combine to form a whole that attracts the reader.

"For a lot of different reasons there is a measure of mythology and fairy tales in much of the fantasy being published. But you can trace that in almost every genre, because so much of what's involved in those stories has to do with the basic concepts we see in all storytelling. The fundamental relationships that exist between people also play a major part. There tend to be storylines that deal with the way people meet and separate and come back together again. This is very traditional, all the way from mythology forward. There's only so many ways that we fall in love and fall out of love, for example.

"If you're going to be any good at fantasy, or any other kind of fiction, you have to be able to identify with the characters you're dealing with. Bits and pieces of you go into those characters, and even though they may not be totally representative, in some small way they stand for a part of you.

"When I'm working on a book I sometimes get so involved in it that I miss out on everything. I can't stop thinking about it and it's on my mind all the time. You don't ever disassociate yourself from it and you don't ever really stop thinking about it. To such an extent that I can't imagine life without storytelling."

Terry Brooks' novels are published in the UK by Little, Brown (formerly Macdonald) in their Orbit line.

IZ 21

We indicated last month that issue 21 of *Interzone* was out of print. We've since found a boxful, so please note that it's available again at the price stated below.

BACK-ISSUE CLEARANCE SALE!

Copies of all back issues of *Interzone* are still available at £2.50 each (£2.80 overseas; \$5 USA) – with the exception of the out-of-print numbers 1, 5, 7, 17 and 22.

Now we've decided to have another clear-out of surplus stocks of old *Interzone* back issues. This time, we're selling off all available issues up to and including number 30 for the special price of **£1.50** each inland, including postage & packing. That's £1 off the standard back-issue price of £2.50. (Overseas rate £2; USA \$4.)

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The Donaldson Chronicles

Stan Nicholls meets Stephen Donaldson

Stephen Donaldson has been a dominant force in fantasy fiction for fifteen years. His first trilogy, *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever*, published in 1977, was a bestseller and triggered a stream of further titles, gaining an estimated readership of eighteen million worldwide.

In 1950, when he was three, his Presbyterian parents took him to India, where they carried out missionary work until returning to the States thirteen years later. "My father was a doctor, not a preacher," he explains, "and when he went to India he was the only orthopaedic surgeon for five million people. But he wasn't all that interested in conversion. What my dad was interested in was being needed."

Did Donaldson inherit that feeling? "There are probably parallels in the way my ego functions, but like him I try to control it. He wanted to be needed, and his counterbalance was that medicine is also a form of service, and that makes it essentially an authentic transaction."

"For me, I probably desire to be, you know, the greatest writer in the English language, or something equally huge. My counterbalance is that I perceive myself through the stories I tell. They do not exist for my benefit. I don't write stories because they're comfortable for me; I don't write them because they're easy for me. I don't write them for the money. What I do is give myself to them, because it's my job to be their servant. I balance my ego by focusing on the integrity of the story rather than on my own aggrandisement."

Donaldson was not a prodigious reader as a child. "Growing up in India we had a very erratic supply of books; missionaries consistently read the Bible, *Time* magazine and mystery novels. So in my reading at that time there was some fantasy and science fiction, but not much. I liked what I read but had no opportunity to pursue it as a passion."

"But I spoke early, and my use of language was complex. I guess every kid likes to have something they can do that makes them cute so the grown-ups don't throw them out with the bath water. So I've always had a kind of intimate relationship with language. It's



Stephen Donaldson

how I understand life. I see with words, I touch with words, and I definitely think through language. You could hear the words if there were a speaker on the side of my head. I assumed that was true of everybody, but many people have told me they don't work that way."

When he returned to the States in his teens he found it a bizarre and alienating place. "It was tough. I had

one year left in high school when I went back to America and spent it in front of the television set. It was the safest way to absorb cultural information."

"My social skills were completely different. I'd grown up totally surrounded by missionaries, for crying out loud, and suddenly I was in standard American society. I mean, for me a hot date would be to get to hold a

girl's hand. It was excruciatingly painful and for a long time I felt a misfit. These days I just feel eccentric."

He harboured no early ambitions to write. But this changed when he went to college. "It was a very sudden discovery for me, but when I realized it, it immediately made sense. In retrospect I could see I had been coming toward that decision all my life. Fortunately, I initially got intense encouragement from people. One of my English professors said, 'It's insolent for you to write so well.' That was nice. I thought, 'I can live with this.' Although if somebody came along and said, 'You're daft, man, you have no talent; this is a stupid thing for a grown-up to do,' it's possible I could have been dissuaded. But all my hard knocks came later."

Volume one of the *Covenant* series, *Lord Foul's Bane*, was started in college, Donaldson having conceived the idea of a hero with leprosy after hearing his father deliver a speech on the subject in India. He submitted the trilogy to forty-seven publishers and was rejected by every one of them. "I got extraordinarily downhearted. One of the things about being the son of missionaries is that they never raise you to have any self-confidence. I was not the kind of person who said, 'I know I'm good and I'm going to stick this out!' No. But I knew it was the best I could do, and I knew that if I wasn't good at this there really was nothing I was ever going to be good at."

"I ran out of publishers about the same time I finished the story. That was a real crisis. There I was with three big books written and I'd been rejected by every fiction publisher in the United States. I had no idea where to turn. The story was done and my anchor was gone. I have no words to describe what a difficult situation that was."

"I couldn't stand to have the manuscripts sitting on my desk, so I re-submitted them to Ballantine Books, for the sole reason that they published Tolkien in the United States. I did not know that since the last time my books had been there they had fired all their editors, and the new people loved the books as soon as they ran into them. Within a few weeks I got a letter of acceptance."

Because of the sense of alienation his upbringing in India left him with, it would be easy to analyse his books as culture-shock novels, Donaldson says. "What happens in them is that characters are ripped out of the context they're familiar with and get thrown into a totally alien set of problems. They have to sink or swim."

His new series, "The Gap," a five-volume science-fiction saga, breaks this pattern. "For the first time

I haven't written explicitly about outsiders. All the *Covenant* books, my other novels and the short stories, feature outsiders. But in these books I'm trying to start with an integrated cast, and that's been fun for me, although I keep saying, 'Where's my outsider? Where's my way of understanding this world?' I've had to invent other ways to solve the problems an outsider solves."

The outsider functions as an Everyman serving the readers' interests? "In this one specialized way we're talking about, yes. There might be other applications of the same concept, but this is purely on the informational level. My heroes do not in themselves go around offering explanations of what they do every day. But then how do you tell it to the reader? Do you stop the action and make speeches the way they do in Victorian novels? That's very removed, and it keeps the reader at a kind of distance from the story. I don't want that. I want my readers placed right there in the story. An outsider allows you to achieve that and still get the information across."

Before he realized he had a passion for the written word Donaldson had employed storytelling in quite a different way. "I told stories in my head all the time," he says, "but they were entirely for my own benefit."

"I was terrified when I was in India. It was a very scary place for me, especially in the early years, and I was going into some kind of personality breakdown my parents didn't have any idea what to do about. So I invented an imaginary friend named Hunter. He was strong, brave, quick, skilful. He could face anything. In the early days I would imagine him standing beside me when I had to do something frightening. Ultimately the imagination is the best survival tool we have, and it was certainly my best survival tool when I was growing up. I used stories as a way of facing life."

"As the years passed Hunter faded away, but that idea of imagining a character facing a situation and what would have to happen in order to get him to feel a certain way remained."

He learned early on that he needed to be the protagonist in his fantasies, rather than Hunter, because it wasn't good enough to have somebody else doing it. "Then I realized stories were more believable if they were told in the past tense, because that implied they had already happened and couldn't be changed. So I started telling stories about things that *had* happened. They seemed even more real. All these techniques directly related to my professional life later on, but I was focusing on them as a kid in ways that nobody else I know ever did."

He doesn't do much of that kind of fantasizing any more. "I tend now to focus those energies on the more

objective stories I'm telling rather than ones that are for my personal benefit. Usually these days when I catch myself in one of those little personal fantasies I know there's a problem there, something I haven't dealt with yet. Because if I'm telling myself a story it must mean I'm scared of something that I'm not facing. So I try to eliminate the story and go to the thing I'm scared of. I mean, as a grown-up I can do that. But as a kid I needed those stories desperately."

Does Donaldson's Christian upbringing mean that he imposes any kind of moral subtext on his stories? "No. Where do I get the arrogance to tell people what to think? Am I going to insist that the stories present my views to the world, and try to persuade everybody to think the same way I do, that I should use these ideas to try to make the world a better place? Whose definition of a better place are we talking about here?"

I remind him that he is quoted as saying, "It's part of a writer's concern to pose questions on the importance of being. Fantasy is a way of dealing with the big issues of life, God and love." That does sound like an agenda of sorts. "That's my defence of fantasy you're getting there, not my explanation of what is actually in my books."

"I've grown up in an intellectual world which sneers at fantasy, and I've put a lot of mental effort into working out my apologia, but it is an apologia for the genre. In specific, I believe that stories carry their own themes and agendas. The purpose of storytelling, I believe, is to try to answer the question of what it is to be human. But I do not have an answer which I'm trying to embody in the stories. I am trying to discover the answer that is implicit in the stories. That's the distinction."

"I'm a trained analyst of literature – I was working on a PhD on Joseph Conrad when I dropped out of college – but the specifics of the relationship between me and my ideas is something I really don't care to analyse until after the book is written. Once it's on paper it's *safe*, you know? All this talk I do about fantasy happened after I wrote the *Covenant* books. Those ideas didn't exist in my head while I was writing them. I wrote them because it was such an exciting story that I couldn't not write them. Then afterwards people asked me to account for it: 'But fantasy isn't serious, is it? It's not real literature, is it?' So now I put on my preacher hat and I go pound the pulpit in defence of fantasy, and to a certain extent in defence of myself."

It would be nice to think fantasy had got to the stage where it needed no defence. "Yes. It's weird that we've arrived at the point where it required defending. One of the oldest and most enduring forms of literature in all

languages is fantasy. We need metaphors of magic and monsters in order to understand the human condition. It's only in modern times that we have suddenly decided this narrative language isn't serious, that it's for children; grown-ups don't believe these things.

"Something has gone out of our ability to think about ourselves. Because that's all magic and monsters are – a way of thinking about who we are, and they are a very fruitful set of tools if you allow yourself to use them. If you deny yourself fantasy you're truncating your ability to think about a whole range of human experiences.

"We reached the point in our sophistication of our self-perceptions that it no longer seemed possible to make epic statements about the meaning of life. You got laughed at for doing it, and epics ceased to be written. But in order for us to have this type of heroism, beauty, glory, magic and power we have to get away from real life."

Tolkien opened the door. "Now somebody like me can come along and say, 'Is it possible to recreate the connection between the epic and the real world?' If it's possible to do, that's what Thomas Covenant is for. He is the needs of the real world projected onto the stage of the Tolkienesque epic fantasy in order to see if that sort of thing can be centred in him and brought back into relevance with a sophisticated perception of modern reality. Whether I've succeeded in this or not only time will tell.

"Tolkien made my work possible. By the end of the last century the epic was essentially dead as a form of literature for us. He reinvented it as a literary genre and made it possible to write epics again. I could not have come along and done the kind of work I do if Tolkien hadn't come along first. That's very essential.

"Second, the way Tolkien reinvented the epic was by separating it from the real world. From *Beowulf* up through Tennyson the whole purpose of the epic was to comment explicitly on 'The Meaning of Life.' The real world was its subject. It might use God and the Devil and all those other things as vehicles for discussing stuff, but it was talking about messages the readers were predisposed to receive, in their own lives, in the real world."

There is a sense, Donaldson believes, in which the purer, simpler and more beautiful worlds at the heart of so much fantasy really did exist. "It's a perceptual matter. We used to believe that the Earth was the centre of the universe, that the Sun revolved around the Earth, and that God's creation revolved around Mankind. All of those perceptions have had their feet kicked out from under them now.

"Our anthropomorphism of the universe has been eroded steadily by what we've discovered about creation. The result is that we have lost the ability to perceive ourselves as being big, to perceive ourselves as heroes."

Donaldson also writes mystery novels under the pseudonym Reed Stephens. The latest, *The Man Who Tried to Get Away*, is published in paperback by Fontana at £4.50.

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The ORCHARDS OF THE MOON

Stephen Baxter



The elf – tall, elderly, well-dressed – walked stiffly into Doga's, swishing the hem of his robe as if fearful that the very substance of the human-owned bar would contaminate his person.

Pero, alone at his usual table with a growing row of empty Kotu's Waterfall-label ale bottles, discreetly appraised the newcomer. Doga himself was a fat, grubby, warm lump of a man who was working behind the bar's single counter, morosely drying tankards on what looked like a piece of old vest; he barely gave his new customer a second glance.

At one time Pero had been used to being the only elf in human dives like Doga's. Well, that had suited him; humans, with their crude, honest vigour, seemed to match Pero's temperament rather better than most of his fellow elves, and – apart from the odd fracas – the human regulars of Doga's had come to accept Pero as an honorary member of their loose clan.

The fact that he could actually afford to drink here most of the time was another plus, of course.

But times were changing. The great Families of the ancient, walled elven city of Tropus, the remote heart

of the sprawling elf-human metropolis of Greater Tropus, were falling on hard times. Elven Book-magic wasn't the force it used to be, and more and more were turning to places like Doga's in search of a welcome of any kind.

But Pero could tell that this gentleman, standing in the doorway silhouetted by dusty afternoon sunlight and looking around uncertainly, was different; this was not an elf who was used to slumming it.

So what brought him here?

The newcomer's gaze alighted on Pero. And the elegant old face drained of colour; the thin, bloodless lips parted softly in shocked recognition.

Without hesitation the newcomer made his way through the half-empty tavern to Pero's table.

Pero kept his eyes on his latest bottle of Kotu's, his fingertip idly tracing its characteristic label design – the Waterfall that fell from nowhere and disappeared to nowhere. But inwardly he felt his muscles gather into knots.

The elf stood before Pero's table. His silver-yellow



hair was balding, and his eyes were like watery blue diamonds set in a mask of wrinkled, tough leather; but his jaw was square and strong. His cloak was of brushed freighter-bird fur, Pero saw, a quiet statement of wealth. Quite a contrast to Pero's shabby human-style tunic.

"My name is Riva. And you are Pero Perolet," the stranger said.

Pero looked up as if startled, and grinned sleepily. "That sounds like a statement, not a question. Do I know you?"

Riva disdainfully sat on a grimy stool opposite Pero. "No. But I know you." A bloodless smile touched that arrogant mouth. "In a sense I've known you all my life."

For some reason that chilled Pero. What could it have meant? This gentleman must have been twice Pero's age.

Pero thought quickly. He clearly had some sort of advantage here, an advantage he didn't yet understand. But his well-developed instincts began to scent money.

Big money.

"Can I ask how you know me?"

"You may not," Riva said sharply.

Pero nodded sagely. "Well, if that's the limit of your conversation you'll not be offended if I ask you to leave me and my beer in peace."

Riva's eyes narrowed in anger. He turned to Doga, who was still smearing dirt around his tankards, quietly watchful; with a peremptory gesture Riva called for another bottle of Kotu ale. He eyed Pero with a rarefied contempt. "I take it this is what you're hinting for."

Pero did not reply.

The lumpy barman brought the bottle over. Pero cracked it open on the scarred lip of the table. "Cheers," he grinned, raising his refreshed glass. "You won't join me?"

Riva, staring at the grimy glass, could not restrain a shudder. "I'm here to offer you employment," he said.

Pero raised his eyebrows. "Then you know my profession as well as my name."

Riva sniffed. "If you can dignify grubbing-about for facts like a pig after roots as a profession; yes."

"I take it you have a case for me to solve."

"You can put it like that, if you wish." Riva's electric gaze fixed on Pero. "But believe me, Perolet, the assignment I wish to discuss with you has as little resemblance to the petty thievery, adultery and general viciousness which supplies so much of your uncertain income as it is within your grasp to comprehend."

"I'm overwhelmed," Pero said drily, and he took another pull of his beer. "My terms – including daily expenses – are –"

Now genuine anger seemed to fire Riva. "You will discuss your 'terms' later, with my assistants. I have no interest in your 'terms.' Pero Perolet, I am here to discuss with you a matter which should be at the very core of your loyalties – as an elf, and as a civilized being." He leaned forward, and Pero found it difficult not to recoil from those hard blue eyes. "*I mean the degradation of elven Book-magic itself.*"

"Hold it." Pero held up his hands, momentarily stunned. The magical power derived from the Twelve Books was the source of the temporal power of old Tropus, of the Families... and its mysterious decline over the last few years, manifested in a thousand tiny ways – like the failure of the simple healing spells sold by the Guild of Mages – was the reason elves were losing influence in Greater Tropus.

There wasn't a bigger issue in the affairs of the city.

He said, "You're saying that Book-magic is being destroyed, weakened... deliberately?"

"I am saying exactly that."

Pero half-laughed. "Well, it's a big job all right. And you want me – me – to find out who's doing it?"

"Oh, no," said Riva in a matter-of-fact tone. "We know who's responsible."

Pero frowned. "Who, then? A human?"

Riva almost laughed. "I had heard you are intelligent, if only in a rodent-like, cunning fashion. I trust you will soon begin to display this quality. No, Perolet; not a human."

"But humans will surely gain in the long run from a decline of elven power, influence."

"Perhaps. And it is true that the elven race as a whole is suffering. My own Family –" Now Riva hesitated, and his elegant mouth worked for a moment. "My own Family has been forced to accept certain arrangements which, in normal times, would have been quite beyond words."

"My heart bleeds," Pero said, grinning.

"As it should," Riva said, evidently disgusted. "But my point is that not *all* elves are set to lose by the decline of Book-magic, the weakening of the influence of Tropus." He reached forward and, with gloved fingertips, picked up one of Pero's empty bottles. "Kotu," he said, the simple name sounding like an insult in his mouth. "Mathri Kotu. Who supplies the likes of you with –" He waved the bottle in disgust. "– the likes of this."

Pero nodded. Kotu the trader, the supplier of Waterfall ale and a hundred other products – the sole supplier of most of them, in fact, including the ale – Kotu, the renegade elf who spurned the old ways and traded with humans as if one of their own. The most powerful elf outside the ancient Families. "Yes, I can

see how Kotu could gain –"

Riva said bitterly, "Many times Kotu has confronted the Council of Families, over issue after issue. Rights to trade, loans, access to the Twelve Books themselves. And always he has been denied." Riva shook his head. "We are elves, not humans; we do not wish to live by grubby human rules of trade, economics... Kotu could never accept that. As if in revenge, he has more than once threatened to destroy us. This is Kotu's revenge, come to pass."

Pero frowned. "So we have a crime... a most enormous crime. But, forgive me, Riva, I don't quite see what my role in this will be. You already know the criminal. Why don't you simply stop him?"

Riva pulled his freighter-bird fur cloak closer around him. "Of course we have considered such courses." He looked at Pero, as if judging his trustworthiness afresh. "Pero, we have considered killing Mathri Kotu."

For the second time Pero was genuinely shocked. "By the Twelve Books," he breathed, the childish curse coming unbidden to his lips. He felt the muscles of his stomach constrict, as if anticipating a blow. No elf had murdered another since the dark days of the Moon Wars, thousands of years earlier. "You really are desperate, aren't you?"

"It would not be a difficult matter," Riva said, his tone chilling. "No elven hand need be lifted. Indeed, Kotu himself has shown us the way... It is said that he employs a human assassin." He eyed Pero. "You should remember that," he said.

"I'm not likely to forget," Pero said humourlessly. "I take it you haven't proceeded with this plan."

"Of course not," Riva said. "No Family would sully itself with such a crime, even by indirect association."

Pero felt a small surge of relief. So he wasn't being hired as an assassin.

"Kotu must be stopped, before the decline of Book-magic becomes irreversible," Riva said. "We have hesitated for years – for far too long. I want you to find out how this – trader – is deconstructing the power of the Twelve Books. Knowledge is the ultimate power, Pero Perolet, more potent than any magic; armed with the knowledge you retrieve for us we will surely destroy Kotu's influence once and for all."

Pero nodded, thinking rapidly. "All right. I'd need to understand how the Twelve Books' magic works, of course; I'd need to see the Books themselves, and –"

"Out of the question," Riva said calmly.

Pero opened his mouth to protest, but Riva had spoken with an automatic authority; already the older elf's gaze was travelling idly around the grubby bricks of the bar's walls.

"Well then, I'll need to break into Kotu's mansion. Maybe you can help –"

Riva sniffed. "I'm sure you're aware that Mathri Kotu does not live as other elves of my class, within the ancient walls of Tropus itself. His 'mansion,' as you call it, is set on the northern fringes of the human shanty area –"

"Of Greater Tropus, as it's called by elves of my class," Pero said mildly.

"My influence does not extend so far," Riva said loftily. "Nor would I wish it to."

Pero drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "You're

not going to be much help."

"When will you have the information we need?" Riva asked, his watery blue eyes calm and measured.

Pero laughed. "I'll let you know...once I've decided whether to accept the assignment. First I want the answers to two questions. Why me? Riva, I suspect I'm the right elf for the job, but I'm hardly a mainstay of the great Families' high society. To be brutally frank, most elves of your *class* don't want to know me...expect when they need someone disreputable enough not to be too proud to track down their stolen jewellery, or to confirm a spouse's indiscretion."

Riva laughed, and for a few seconds something almost like sympathy settled in his arrogant face. "You've a lot of bitterness in your soul, Perotel. There were plenty of volunteers for this great mission – foolish young braves, mostly, but many of them elves better suited to the task than you...but –"

"But you chose me."

Riva shook his head. "You were – chosen."

Pero's eyes narrowed. "You recognized me when you walked in here. But I've never seen you before. And you said you'd known me all your life. Riva, what's going on here?"

"I can't tell you. I won't tell you."

"Riva –"

"Your second question?"

Pero studied the closed, aloof face. "For that we'll need these staff of yours, if you're not prepared to discuss something as sordid as money..."

The lingering traces of sympathy vanished from Riva's face. "You will be paid, if that's what's most important to you," he said with dripping contempt. "You will be contacted."

And, without further words, the elf stood in a swirl of freighter-bird fur, left money on the table for the beer, and stalked from the bar.

Pero stayed where he was, idly studying the endless-Waterfall trademark of Kotu's beer. Outwardly he maintained his calm aspect, but his heart was pumping.

Danger, uncertainty, risk, seemed to be returning to his life. He faced a new gamble. Somehow the day seemed brighter...

He waved over the barman. "Hey, Doga. Come over here and tell me all you know about Book magic. I think my shareholding in this dump is about to increase..."

Seen from the air, by the eye of a high-flying freighter-bird perhaps, Greater Tropus would have looked like a rough quilt of brown and grey, with Tropus itself a fist of diamond and glass at the quilt's very heart.

The ancient walled city of Tropus had remained almost unchanged for centuries – some said, since the time of the Moon Wars themselves. The powerful dynasties whose sinewy, magic-based influence coursed through Tropus had dominated the surrounding regions for most of that time. And the magical potency of the Families derived from the Twelve Books, held in a strongroom somewhere in the Chamber of the Council of Families.

Legend reported that the Books were transcriptions of inconceivably mighty oaths hurled at each other

by Triome and Gyujni, the last, greatest wizards of ancient times, whose final battle had settled the Moon Wars.

Pero, inquiring about magic and history and the shifting balances of power, wondered what the world must have been like long ago, when the true archetypes of magic had walked the lands.

No one knew why the power of magic derived from the ancient Books should now be declining. The spells used outside the walls of Tropus were incantations whose power derived from the Books themselves. Pero toyed with the notion that a distorted use of the spells could somehow feed corruption back into the heart of the Books...but, since the flow of power from the Books seemed all one way, he found it difficult to imagine how this could work.

Therefore, surely, to weaken the influence of the Twelve Books it must be necessary to damage in some way the ancient texts themselves. How could anyone outside Tropus – even Kotu himself – perform such a feat?

As his inquiries drew a blank, Pero slowly realized that his only hope of resolving Riva's conundrum lay with Mathri Kotu himself.

The hypothetical high-flying freighter-bird would have espied another exception from the general meanness of the human dwellings in Greater Tropus, located in a waste area on the northern fringe of the sprawl: but this was no ancient city of glittering spires and shining walls; this was a modern, brooding fortress, its walls high, black and ugly: the fortress of Mathri Kotu.

Pero spent many days trying to find a (relatively) safe way into the daunting keep; he scouted the layout of the keep itself, and studied old maps and surveys, hoping to find traces of underground passageways or rivers, or other weaknesses in Kotu's fastness.

He had little success.

But in the end it proved rather easier to get into the keep than he had expected...

Pero, being elven, towered a good head's height over most humans. But the creature who had found him scouting Kotu's land, while indubitably a male human – the smell alone was enough to tell Pero that – was taller than Pero himself.

And about four times as broad.

The man was thick-bearded, scarred and dressed in a crudely-cut robe so grimy that Pero could not identify colours other than those provided by mud, blood and snot. The human glowered at Pero like a storm about to break.

Pero got up from the patch of long grass where he'd been hiding and grinned, brushing dew from his jacket. "Hello," he said brightly.

The human hit him.

Pero, his mouth filling up with blood, climbed to his feet again. "I suppose you're wondering what I'm doing here," he said thickly.

The human bunched his clawlike fingers and grinned, revealing a mouthful of wooden teeth.

"Or maybe not," said Pero weakly.

The human moved towards Pero and proceeded to do his job.

As he was half-carried, half-dragged through a tight, mean gateway in the black walls of the keep, Pero

tried to keep what was left of his wits alert and to observe all he could.

Kotu's fastness was founded on a hemispherical artificial mound perhaps fifty yards high and twice as broad. The mound was circled by ditches, ramps and a deep moat. The walls, of some magically-reinforced seamless stone, towered to the height of ten men; and Pero counted five paces as he was taken through the thickness of the walls and into the interior of the keep itself. These defences were sufficient, Pero thought, to repel a human army even from the greatest of the distant, fabled human empires, and a hundred times too powerful for any theoretical assault the poor, lice-ridden populace of Greater Tropus could manage.

The house itself was a squat, windowless cylinder of the same glowering material as the walls. The rest of the enclosed area within the walls was given over to rough constructions of wood and stone – mostly storehouses, Pero suspected, to support Kotu's many trading activities. He heard the chink of bottles, a smell of grain from one of the grimmer buildings; despite the beating he'd already received Pero felt his spirits rising a little at the thought that he was so close to the source of Waterfall beer.

Somewhat to Pero's surprise his taciturn captor was dragging him, not towards some cell in a remote corner of the enclosure, but towards the house itself. Pero fixed his eyes on the darkling, wintry sky, the small, grey Moon which already floated there, for he was certain he would never see natural light again.

He turned to the human. "You do know I'm not dressed for dinner."

The human grinned and hit him again.

When Pero awoke, lying on his back on some warm but unyielding surface, he thought for a few seconds that he'd died and arrived in paradise.

There was a waterfall over his head. It emerged from a patch of mist hovering just below a distant ceiling – and fell, crashing, through thirty feet into another patch of mist about five feet from the floor.

And didn't reemerge.

Pero, turning a stiff neck, saw that the stone floor underneath the lower mist patch was as dry as old bones.

Pero closed his eyes, opened them again. The waterfall didn't go away; the clear torrent, twinkling in candlelight, sent spray into the air of the room as it fell, and there was a moist, live smell about it, as if it were a section of a living river rather than some ornamental fountain. He even saw the silvery glint of fishes within its shining flanks; but they were large, spiny creatures of a type he didn't recognize.

He tried to sit up, and pain returned. Well, he reflected sourly, so much for the paradise hypothesis.

Someone kicked him in the gut.

When he was able to straighten again, he looked up. An elf stood over him: Mathri Kotu, severe, ageless, eyes black, dressed in a grey human-style smock. Pero thought it would be harder to imagine a greater contrast with the rich but traditional style of an old-Family elf like Riva.

Kotu looked down at Pero with a patient, pitiless curiosity.

Pero glanced around quickly. From the size of this chamber he judged he was in the largest room of the house; windowless, it was lit by five or six guttering lamps fixed to the walls. The furniture was simple and severe, the stone floor uncovered, the walls unadorned by any picture or tapestry. The few tables were piled with bird-fur-bound papers and quills – books of accounts, by the look of it. The only splash of colour came from a bowl of fruit on a low table; Pero's rapid gaze took in apples of a deep, green hue, larger than any he'd seen before.

For some reason the apples nagged in his mind. He'd expected some luxury in this place – but apples like that, in the middle of winter? They almost looked like the huge apples of the lost, semi-legendary orchards of the Moon...but that was impossible, of course. Could Kotu maintain some form of enclosed orchard?

But that didn't seem in keeping with what the room said about the rest of Kotu's character. Overall the effect was rather of a prison than a home; even the waterfall was a flourish of power rather than an ornament. This was the working-place of a being who relished power, and its uses.

Kotu and Pero weren't alone. Apart from the elf Pero saw the grimy human, standing guard close to the single door; the human stared fixedly at Pero, his wood-lined mouth half-open as if hungry. Pero nodded to him. "Nice to see you again."

The human growled.

...And there was a fourth person, Pero realized, squinting to see through the gloom. It was a girl – an elven girl, dressed in a crude but expensive-looking dress that showed more of her flesh than seemed to suit her. The girl looked strong, attractive in a robust way, but her face was not conventionally pretty, Pero thought; below a pinned bun of blonde hair her eyes were too sharply blue, her jaw a little too square. Her hands pulled at each other as she stood in her corner and watched Pero's suffering.

Pero stared at her, wondering who it was she reminded him of.

He worked his jaw, avoided the temptation to spit out the blood. "You're Mathri Kotu," he said to the elf.

The elf applauded silently, mocking him. "And you're Perolet, the deductive genius."

"So you know about me?"

"I know everything." The elf's voice was deep, more human than elven, and now he walked around Pero, his heavy boots loud on the stone floor. "Since I learned that that pompous ass Riva had recruited you to spy on me – why, I've barely been able to sleep at night."

Pero noted with a corner of his mind that the elven girl flinched, subtly, when Riva's name was mentioned. He sat up gingerly; his head ringing from various blows, the room seemed to spin around him for a few seconds. "I like the waterfall," he said. "Your trademark, I guess. I always thought it was just a pretty picture on a beer bottle..."

Kotu, still stalking, disdained to answer.

Pero stared up at the rushing, captive waterfall. There were clear gaps between the misty terminations and the walls and floor, so any kind of mechanical system to maintain this marvel was ruled out. Obviously Kotu, while working for the destruction of

magic, was not averse to its use when it suited him. Perhaps, Pero wondered, there was a simple gateway system to take the water from bottom to top... but that seemed too easy. Where were the fish coming from? And what about the green, river-like smell?

He'd never heard of a spell on this scale, with such power. What if, he wondered, Kotu had some new source of magical power... something which didn't depend on the Twelve Books?

Then he'd have even more motive for destroying the Books.

Pero felt his nose – battered as it was – begin to twitch. Somehow, his intuition was telling him, this waterfall was at the centre of the mystery of Mathri Kotu.

He said to Kotu, "Riva and the Families think you're responsible for the degradation of Book-magic."

Kotu shrugged casually. "They're right, of course," he said. "As I'm sure you're aware. And they've sent you to find out how I'm doing it."

"You are well informed," Pero said drily. He climbed stiffly to his feet. "Why did you bother to bring me in here?"

"I have a streak of curiosity," Kotu said. "I wondered why they recruited a slumming drunkard like you."

Did you? Pero thought. *Well, Riva had his reasons, even if he wouldn't tell me what they were. So Riva knows something you don't. Interesting.*

"So I wanted to see. Before you died," Kotu said. Now he turned away. "I think I've seen enough."

"So Riva was right," Pero said calmly. "You're a killer. The first for a thousand generations of our kind."

"No," Kotu said. "Brot does my killing."

"But you're responsible –"

Kotu turned to him and smiled, almost politely. "There are many changes in the wind. We have been stagnant far too long, as a race and as a city. You are young. You might have lived to see many of the changes come to pass... I suspect you're the type who might have enjoyed the new world. If your personal weaknesses did not destroy you first." He sighed. "Well, it's academic now. Brot, take him out. Don't make a mess inside the compound, as you did last time."

The punch Pero received this time from the gross human, Brot, was almost delicate, but it was enough to half-stun Pero again, and he could do nothing to resist being dragged by his collar from the room and along a short corridor to the door of the cylindrical building. As they reached the enclosed court Pero tried to draw his strength together. He'd have little enough opportunity, he knew, but what chance there would be would come when Brot took him out of the compound. If he could twist out of the clumsy human's grasp, maybe trip him, and run for it –

"Wait. Brot, wait."

The hulking human paused, turned, bearing Pero like a scarecrow. It was the elven girl from Kotu's chamber; she came hurrying from the open door after them, the moonlight picking out the clean shape of her face. She shivered, her skimpy garment insufficient to shield her from the winter chill.

"Brot." Hesitantly she reached out and touched the human's massive forearm; Brot stared at her delicate



hand like a bird eyeing her fingers. "You don't have to kill him; he's done you no harm."

Brot hissed, showing his wooden teeth.

"Look at him," the girl said. "He's half dead already; just throw him out and let him die." Her hand tightened on Brot's filthy sleeve. "Please, Brot." She lowered her head. "For... me."

Brot hissed again and smiled at the veiled promise in her words; Pero felt the grip on his collar loosen, and wondered at the price this girl was prepared to pay for his life.

Pero said, "Why are you doing this?"

She looked up at him, her ice-blue eyes hard. "I am not with Mathri. I know how it must look. My Family... sent me here."

Pero snorted. "I bet they didn't have much choice about that. I'm sorry. I wish —"

"Take your chance and go. I am an elf, still; I will avert more deaths, if I can."

Brot dragged at Pero's collar, hauling him towards the walls; the girl, shivering, turned to go indoors once more.

Pero called after her, "Thank you... thank you! Won't you tell me your name?"

She closed the door behind her without replying further; but Brot whispered in his ear, his voice heavy with a brutish lust: "Sira. Ss-ira."

And he hit Pero again.

Riva turned from the window, half-silhouetted against a panorama of central Tropus. "I don't know why I agreed to let you in here," he said, his voice full of disdain.

"Let's not play games," Pero said. "You didn't have a choice, and you know it." He took an apple — small and shrivelled, evidently from a winter store — and bit into it, nonchalantly sitting down on a well-stuffed sofa.

The contrast between this room — the heart of Riva's Family home in the middle of old Tropus — and the bleak fortress favoured by Mathri Kotu could not have been greater. Here, extravagant and expensive displays of magical power glistened from the very substance of the walls — literally; it was as if the walls were faceted like huge slabs of diamond. But the sparkling effect, charming as it was, was obscured by thick tapestries and the ostentatious portraits of long-dead elves. The many chairs and sofas were deep and luxuriant, and the tables were piled high with wines, sweetmeats and fruit.

This ostentation made the renegade's taste seem good in comparison. Pero wished he were far away, buried in a bar like Doga's.

Riva, dressed in a long, flowing cloak of dove grey, moved away from the window and sat in a stiff-backed chair. "All right, Perotel. As you say, let's not play games. Tell me what you've found."

"Your daughter," Pero said quietly.

Riva flinched, and Pero found it in his heart to feel some sympathy for the old elf.

Riva said, "What did you learn about Kotu's method of attack?"

Pero bit into his apple; the flesh was powdery, and he discarded the core carelessly on the carpet. "You don't want to hear about Sira?"

"No. No, I don't want to hear about Sira." Riva's

tone was sharp, but then he dropped his head and spoke softly. "You can't understand the — the pressures that operate on someone in my position, Perotel."

Listening to the cultured voice, Pero thought he understood the meaning of the word "misery" for the first time. "No, I doubt if I will be able to understand," he said harshly.

Riva's hands were folded in his lap. "The Families must survive, Perotel; that's paramount. We have to find ways of accommodating to this situation. Of enduring."

"And for precisely which element of 'accommodation' did you sell your daughter's dignity?"

Riva raised his head and Pero saw, in his watery blue eyes, the image of Sira. "I am not interested in your understanding, or even your respect," Riva said with loathing. "Perhaps, though, you can understand why I, and so many others, want Mathri Kotu — stopped."

"I need to see the Twelve Books," Pero said.

"Out of the question."

Pero brushed apple juice from his fingertips. "Riva, try to see past your prejudices and pride. Inspecting the Books is the only possible way I can proceed with this case. Kotu's on to me. He was on to me even before you approached me, that day in Doga's. He knows all my movements, all my strengths and weaknesses..."

Riva fixed him with ice-blue contempt. "Are you afraid?"

"Of course I'm afraid," Pero said patiently. "But that's not the point. The point is that I'm not going to succeed. Not unless you help me."

Riva's mouth was compressed as he shook his head.

Pero sighed. "Look, I know this is difficult for you. To let a low-life like me pore over the most valuable artefacts in the world... But — remember — I'm the chosen one. You told me that yourself. I still don't know why, but I'm the only one who can crack this mystery. And now it's up to you: we either give up here, or you swallow your preconceptions and let me in."

Riva dropped his head and took a deep, shuddering breath. "It isn't solely my decision. I'll need to talk to the Council of Families —"

"Then talk to them." Pero bent to pick up another apple, then thought better of it. "Kotu has better fruit than you," he said absently. "Interesting..." He moved towards the door. "You know where to find me."

Tropus was set out like a mile-wide wheel. The hub of the wheel design was the Chamber of the Council Families, a complex, rambling structure based on a spire no less than a half-mile tall. The wheel's spokes were lanes leading through clusters of elegant and expensive offices, warehouses and dwelling places. And the rim was the wall which separated the ancient city from the human tide of Greater Tropus; but, unlike the perimeter of Kotu's little fortress, the walls of Tropus served only symbolically as defences.

The real defence of Tropus was, and always had been, the magic of the Twelve Books.

As Riva led Pero deeper into Tropus' heart than he had ever travelled before, the young elf was struck

afresh by the arches, the bridges leading nowhere, the buttresses which defied gravity to leap from building to building; the whole city gleamed as if coated in some webbing of stone, metal and glass.

All sustained by Book-magic, of course.

No river, or aqueduct system, fed this elven city with water. More magic. There wasn't even a sewer system! Pero, looking at all this through eyes that had grown accustomed to the human viewpoint, marvelled at the easy assurance of those distant ancestors who had been able so to rely on the continuing, inexhaustible power of their old magic that they felt able to squander it on something so basic as sewerage.

But was it assurance, or arrogance, to become so dependent? For now, as Book magic failed, the Families were forced to deal more and more with the world beyond the walls of Tropus: with the humans, and with Mathri Kotu.

The Twelve Books of Triome and Gyujni were stored in a sealed room at the heart of the Chamber of the Council of Families. It took no less than two hours for Riva, even with his power, privileges and documents of passage sealed by the Council itself, to take Pero through the complex layers of bureaucracy which swaddled the Books as effectively, thought an exasperated Pero, as any walls of metal or stone.

When the last reluctant attendant had closed the last heavy door behind them, Pero felt as if he had been sealed into a small, rather claustrophobic, monkish cell. A single oil lamp sputtered fitfully high on the wall, and Pero struggled to see; but Riva, whispering respectfully, pointed out that the lamp was sealed to keep smoke from damaging the ancient pages; even the level of light was kept low to save the holy words from fading away.

Pero listened to all this with mounting impatience.

At last Riva led him to a set of six tall cabinets, spaced along the axis of the room. The cabinets were shoulder-high frames which seemed to be filled with plates of glass. "And here," Riva said with a tone like a proud father's, "are the Twelve Books themselves."

Pero walked briskly up to the cabinets and peered inside. "They don't look like any books I've ever seen."

He cursed himself for whispering.

Riva shrugged. "They're old," he said. "Immeasurably old. And irreplaceable, obviously. Many generations ago they were split out from their original bindings – of freighter-bird skin, incidentally –"

"Fascinating."

"– and stored here. Each page is sandwiched individually between sheets of glass."

"Will you show me some?"

Riva gathered up his robe and knelt before the nearest cabinet, to reach a wheel set close to the floor; when he turned the wheel a mechanism creaked softly, and Pero saw how individual pages were lifted from the stack within the cabinet, brought to the light at the top of the cabinet, turned over so that both sides could be inspected, and returned to the bottom of the stack.

Pero, whose life had been dominated by the existence of these ancient pages, wasn't sure what he'd been expecting. Certainly some elaborate document, perhaps illuminated, perhaps rendered in an ancient, all-but-forgotten tongue.

What he saw was a sheet of plain-looking paper covered in scrawled handwriting. The words were large and fairly legible, rendered in a round, girlish hand, though the copy was marred by rough crossings-out, unevenness and blots. Here and there the text was broken by scribbled drawings, of landscapes, people and animals, a huge Moon covered by trees.

The paper, yellowed, faded and torn, was clearly ancient, and as fragile as a moth's wing. It was about the size, Pero realized, of the pages of Kotu's accounts books, and it looked as if it had suffered a soaking at some point in its long history. But the handwriting looked as if it could have been written yesterday. And – though some of the words were unfamiliar to him – the bulk of the language was modern.

Riva climbed up from his knees, stiffly. "I hope you realize the privilege this is," he said wearily.

"Yeah, yeah... I'm surprised by the condition of this manuscript. Is it all like this, all Twelve Books?"

"All the same. All scribbled notes, in the same hand." Riva looked at Pero, a half-smile softening his haughty face. "What were you expecting, a prayer-book?"

Pero laughed. "Maybe I was. Certainly not this much mess."

"But the messiness adds to the authenticity of the legend of the origin of the Books, do you see?" Riva said. "Remember the legend. Triome was the greatest wizard of the Moon Families, while Gyujni was a champion selected from the Families of our world. The Moon Wars were truly wars between the worlds, you see, Perolet, and the contest of Gyujni and Triome was the last battle of the Wars. When the battle was done there was no victor. Both wizards were destroyed, their magic exhausted; and the Moon, devastated, had been sent far into space. No more would the freighter-birds fly between the worlds with their cargoes of Moon-apples and Earth gold..."

"It was a turning point in history. Now, Pero, imagine how it must have been to live through that great battle as a spectator, trying to transcribe the spells. One would suspect anything other than scrawl, blots, a panicky mess – wouldn't one?"

"I suppose so. But the modern look of the handwriting, of the language even – what is the rationalization of that?"

Riva smiled again. "There are many mysteries to which we expect no answer, Pero."

Pero shook his head, irritated by Riva's smug lack of curiosity, of analysis. "Would you show me some more?"

Riva inclined his head. "Are you looking for anything particular?"

"No... I don't know."

Riva silently led Pero to the third cabinet in the row of six, knelt, and began systematically turning up the ancient pages.

As he watched the ancient words pass before his gaze Pero said, "Tell me how these Books are used."

Grunting with the effort of turning the wheel, Riva said, "I'm sure you know the procedure as well as any elf. Once or twice a generation a new member of the Guild of Mages is selected by that body. After proving his fitness to the Council of Families, and after undergoing extensive training for memory and concentration, the applicant is brought to this room

...once in his life, and once only. He is allowed to read each page, once and once only. And when he has done so he may invoke the spells recorded here, or variants of them, in his subsequent career."

Pero frowned. "And so the source of the power wielded subsequently by the magician is the Books themselves."

"Yes. One must imagine the transmission of power through contact, you see. From Triome and GyuJNI themselves, through the transliteration of their curses, then through the eyes of the magician; so that a modern magician is only twice removed from the ancients."

Pero stared at the old, faded pages. "Then what could be reducing the power of these Books?"

Riva shook his head. "There is speculation that Kotu has found a way to reflect power from contact-spells, as I've described, back onto the Books themselves. So using the power of the Books to destroy those very Books..."

"I thought of that. Is it possible?"

"No." Riva, sweating politely at his wheel, looked up at Pero. "Or so say the best minds in the Council."

Pero nodded. "Well, you can tell them that Doga – the best mind in, ah, Doga's bar – agrees with them." He rubbed the space between his eyes. "But still the Books are weakened. Have you measured any change, any visible corruption?"

"No. The Books are not being physically degraded in any way. But change there must be."

Pero tried to work it through. The Books were as well-protected – by magic and by metal and stone – as any artefact in the world. What could reach through such layers of armour? And the Books had been as well encased for thousands of years. He frowned, his thoughts flowing. Was it possible, then, for a powerful mage to evade such defences by reaching into history itself, to the time before the defences had been erected?

In any event it would take magic to work such a trick. But an independent source of magic from the Books themselves, it seemed. He remembered Kotu's waterfall, and his speculation that some independent magic source could be fuelling that.

Independent magic... The waterfall, that spectacular, arrogant display of power was the key. It had to be.

He became aware that the room had grown silent; Riva had stopped turning his page-lifting wheel. Pero looked down at him. "Is something wrong?"

"I have not been certain whether to show you this," Riva said. "Perhaps it is for the best."

Pero, puzzled, turned to look at the page Riva had brought to the head of the cabinet's stack. It bore a single drawing.

Pero's heart seemed to stop beating in his chest.

Riva glared up at Pero from his kneeling position. "So now you know how I recognized you. Now you know how we – the Council – knew that you were the one for this assignment. But why you?" the old man hissed, his ice-blue eyes suddenly bitter. "Why someone so unworthy? Why you? Why not me?"

Pero stared at him for long seconds, in his shock barely able to hear what Riva was saying; then he turned back to the page.

On the ancient paper of the most precious, most protected artefact in the world, a lost artist who had

died a thousand generations before Pero's birth had sketched a portrait – crude but unmistakable – of Pero Perolet.

Pero's heart pounded; he gripped the sides of the cabinet, feeling as if the floor were falling away beneath him. How could anything so strange belong to a sane, rational universe?

Then the surge of superstitious awe subsided, and he began to think again.

And soon he understood.

"The waterfall," he breathed. "I've got to get to that damned waterfall. I knew that was the key, but I didn't understand how..."

"Perolet?" Riva, sounding baffled, climbed painfully to his feet.

"Riva, I'm about to gamble my life for you again." He grinned, exhilarated. "Maybe we should start discussing down-payments on my fees –"

In the shadows of Kotu's keep, Pero faced the brutal human, Brot.

Pero tried to stand his ground, feeling the dampness of the long grass around his ankles.

"Listen to me," he said urgently. "You've got to take me inside."

Brot's progress towards him was steady, mechanical, and a kind of lust shone in his eyes.

Pero said rapidly, "If you kill me now Kotu will know you didn't kill me last time. That you disobeyed him. Right?"

Brot's huge hams of footsteps hesitated, just for an instant, but then ploughed on, leaving dark trails in the rain-soaked grass.

"But," said Pero, "if you take me in, what I have to give him is so valuable, he'll be so pleased, that he'll reward you for sparing me. You see that, don't you? Brot?"

Now Brot stopped, facing Pero; the elf could feel a warm blast of air from Brot's wide, filth-encrusted nostrils. He took Pero by the throat, but comparatively gently, reflected Pero. Almost reasonable, all things considered. Now it all depended on how sophisticated Brot's thinking was. Was he capable of deferring a greater reward to the future, or would he simply take the easy pleasure of cracking Pero's head now?

Brot's fingers loosened from Pero's throat...

But he continued to hit Pero.

Well, Pero thought as he curled over himself on the wet, cold ground, it was no more than he would have expected. Almost a friendly greeting...

He sank into unconsciousness.

"I ordered you killed." Kotu's eyes were black and terrible.

Pero, once more cast to the floor beneath the spectacular suspended waterfall, struggled to sit up. Beyond the towering form of Kotu he made out the shadowed figure of the girl, Riva's daughter Sira; her eyes were fixed on his face, beseeching. He said through a tight throat, "I tricked Brot. It's not his fault. I lured him into a discussion of modern philosophy, you see, and trapped him in a logical paradox which –"

The kick to his ribs came from Kotu's own expensively-shod boot. "You can omit the cleverness. You survived one trip here. Tell me why you have returned, before Brot kills you before my eyes."

Pero got to his feet, being careful to move more slowly than he needed to. He glanced around surreptitiously, reminding himself of the layout of the room. The suspended waterfall dominated the centre of the room; its hissing rush provided a constant, distracting backdrop of sound. Mathri Kotu stood between Pero and the water. *I have to get to that waterfall...* Of the few pieces of stark furniture, the most promising from Pero's point of view seemed to be a small, hard wooden couch sited close to the suspended base of the falls. Blank account books were piled on the couch. Brot – and the girl – stood opposite the couch, on the far side of the chamber.

Pero raised a hand to his head, his mind working quickly. He just needed to keep Kotu distracted long enough to get plausibly to that damn couch. "I've worked it out," he said.

Kotu's face twisted into an uncertain frown. "Worked what out?"

Pero met his gaze, trying to keep him off-balance. "How you're corrupting the Books. It's the waterfall, isn't it?"

Kotu seemed to be trying to control his reaction to that, and Pero felt his confidence grow. The renegade said slyly, "Then may I expect a call from Riva and the rest of the old women on that Council of theirs?"

"No," Pero said. "Because I haven't told them yet."

A trace of triumph showed in Kotu's face. "Then why are you here?"

"Because I'm a businessman. Like you, Kotu." He tried to inject bitterness into his voice. "What do I care about the future of Tropus? It's shown damn little care for me. Kotu, I've come to make a deal."

He heard Sira gasp and raise her hands to her mouth; beyond the rushing waterfall he could see how her eyes had widened with the shock of betrayal. He made his voice harsh, impatient. "Look, Kotu, I'm about to fall over here, thanks to your employee's greeting. Can I sit down?"

After a moment, Kotu waved him to the couch; Pero limped to it, shoved the account books to one end of the couch and sat down. He allowed himself a brief moment of triumph, of thrill as the first part of his complex gamble paid off.

"Why should I not simply kill you?" Kotu asked, sounding almost intrigued.

Pero sighed. "Use your head, Kotu. Look, I'm good at what I do, but I'm hardly unique. Kill me now and keep this quiet for a while, sure. But sooner or later someone else will figure this out, and come after you again. And again, and again. Will you kill them all?"

"If I have to."

"But eventually one of them is going to do you damage, Kotu. Eventually one of them will stop you."

"Whereas if I let you live –"

"Misdirection," Pero whispered. "Riva trusts me at the moment, I think." There was a sob from Sira, which he ignored. "I can feed him a lie – we can work one out together, if you wish – a lie that will force the Council to spend years following the wrong road, in their quest to get to you..."

Kotu's eyes narrowed. "There *would* be a certain – satisfaction – in such a scenario. The damn fools of the old Families have their heads stuck in the past, and with their monopoly on magic they continue to frustrate the development of trade. I have dreamed of

seeing the walls of Tropus collapse, in one memorable, apocalyptic day; but I can envisage the pleasure of watching the fools waste their fading lives chasing phantoms, as, like the mole, I work steadily to destroy their power from beneath..."

There was a disturbing edge to Kotu's voice now, and Pero saw that this obsession with the destruction of Tropus had brought the elf to the limit of sanity. Keeping his voice light, he said, "Well, I'm glad you like the idea. Maybe we can start to talk terms..."

Kotu's long, powerful face swivelled to Pero. "Indeed. Let me present an opening gambit for our negotiations: go through with this, and I will let you live."

Pero laughed, trying to sound nervous. "Nobody wants to talk money these days. I was hoping for something a little more – substantial."

The renegade thrust his hands into the pocket of his severely-cut jacket. "Your hopes do not interest me. Let me point out another factor, to dampen any speculation you may be entertaining about betraying me in the future, as you already have Riva. I know you, Perolet. And I know your weaknesses... I know of your addiction to alcohol."

Pero frowned.

Kotu smiled up at his tame waterfall. "You're aware that I control the supply of Waterfall ale. Perhaps you're not so aware of my monopoly control of most of the alcohol supplied in this city." That hard, cruel gaze swivelled on Pero. "I wonder if you can anticipate my argument. Not only do I control your time of death... but I also control the only substance, it seems, which makes your life worth living. Now. Shall we proceed with our discussion of 'terms,' as you put it, within these parameters?"

Pero, a little self-consciously, sobbed and buried his face in his hands.

Through gaps between his fingers he watched Kotu, laughing, clasp his hands behind his back and raise his face to the ceiling, his eyes shining with triumph – but averted from Pero.

Pero glanced around quickly. The human, Brot, still skulked on the far side of the waterfall... a long way away.

It was now or never.

With a single motion Pero surged out of his seat, took two steps across the stone floor, and hurled himself head-first at the patch of mist which hovered at the base of the waterfall. He heard Kotu yell, the heavy clumps of Brot's footsteps, but as he hit the ice-cold water the rushing of the falls filled his head –

– and he was plunged into dazzling light.

A powerful current gripped his body. Water filled his mouth and nose; the rushing of the current beat at his ears. A pressure built up in his lungs, and he realized that he had scarcely anticipated being immersed for more than a few seconds. But what if the gateway at the base of Kotu's waterfall led to the bottom of an ocean? He could be miles underwater –

He forced his eyes open – the chill of the water made them sting – and twisted his head, trying to keep steady in the torrent. The light came from a rippling sheet above him; huge globes – the Sun and Moon? – danced on that sheet, surrounded by attendant highlights.

A fish, huge, spiny and ugly, spiralled through the current, inspecting him curiously as it passed.

Pero scrambled through the water towards the sheet of light, clawing at the liquid with fingers, elbows and legs, feeling his winter-heavy clothes and boots drag him downwards.

His lungs seemed to stretch like balloons in his chest; darkness rimmed his vision, but still he scraped his way through the turbulent current –

– and broke through into the air. He plunged upwards into brilliant, hot sunlight and, coughing, expelled water from his mouth and lungs. With his first drag of breath he tasted – with a shock – the warmth of summer, the scents of grass, of growing things.

He dropped back into the water, but the crisis was over now; he clambered to the surface once more and trod water for a few minutes, looking around. He was in a narrow, fast-flowing river. The nearest bank was only a few yards away, and with a series of short, strong strokes he soon reached the still water close to the bank. He clambered out onto a shallow, grass-covered slope.

He lay on his back, lungs still aching, willing the pounding in his head to stop. The river flowed past his feet; glancing back at it he saw an odd swelling in the current a little further upstream – at about the point where he'd emerged from Kotu's gateway. And further upstream still there was a matching, abrupt dip in the water level. Pero rested his head back and smiled. So he'd been right; Kotu's gateways siphoned water away from this river, passed it through the waterfall, and returned it to the river a little way downstream.

So he had travelled through space to the place where Kotu got his water. But had his journey been stranger still?

The Sun hung over him, hot and bright, rapidly drying the film of river-water on his forehead. It was summer, on this side of the gateway... but an ancient summer, to judge by the heat of that Sun. And, hovering beside the Sun and almost lost in its glare, he made out a crescent Moon; but it was not the shrunken, greyed Moon of his own time; this was another world, huge, green and heavy with life; and the lights of elves and humans shone in its shadowed hemisphere.

But there were scars in that world-forest, Pero saw; great craters of lifeless ash.

A birdlike shape, squat yet somehow graceful, swam across the Moon's distant face as he watched. A freighter-bird. Not the atrophied Earthbound specimens Pero had grown up with: these were magnificent animals capable of traversing the thin layers of air between Earth and Moon, bearing freight and passengers in their capacious hold-guts.

So now he knew how Kotu got hold of such delicious apples in the middle of winter, he thought with a smile. They were indeed apples from the fabled orchards of the Moon.

Pero had travelled, through Kotu's gateway, to ancient times. As he had suspected he would. But the reality of it filled him with wonder and delight –

A bolt of purple light crawled from the horizon up into the sky; its ugly glare drowned out even the Sun, and Pero lifted a dripping arm to shield his face. The

beam traced its geometrical track across the sky and, with dispassionate calm, lanced through the climbing freighter-bird. The bird seemed to explode; fragments, glowing, fell back into Earth's dense pool of air and disappeared from view.

Pero, outraged, made to climb to his feet; but a hand on his shoulder pulled him back.

"Keep down, you fool. Do you want to attract one of GyuJNI's bolts for yourself?"

Startled and confused, he twisted onto his belly. Lying beside him on the bank was Sira, the girl from Kotu's keep. Like Pero she was soaked through, but – unlike himself, Pero suspected – the way her hair clung to the lines of her head, the way the water dripped from her cheekbones and chin, and the way her thin, expensive clothes clung to her flesh, all looked comfortable and charming.

She smiled at him, her ice-blue eyes vivid in the Sunlight.

Pero exploded. "What are you doing here? Don't you know it's dangerous?"

She laughed. "Better than you do, it seems – Look out again!"

Sound approached from the horizon: at first a low grumble, then a deep, chesty roar, and finally a furious screaming...

Pero cried out and pressed his face to the grass-covered soil; the ground shook, and blue-purple light filled the sky, leaking through Pero's closed eyelids.

The noise seemed to break over them like a wave, subside, crumble to echoes from distant hills. The bruised magical light faded from the sky, and the Sunlight returned to its hot young strength.

Pero opened his eyes and cautiously sat up. Sira's dress was smeared with the green stains of the grass now, and her smile was a little shakier than before, but she was unhurt. Pero whispered, "Is that what I thought it was?"

She nodded her head. "The battle of the wizards. You worked this out, didn't you? Kotu's power derives from the gateways which feed his waterfall. They are passages, not just through space – but through time. By travelling through them we have returned to the Moon Wars, to the era of Triome and GyuJNI." She looked around, uneasily. "Already their battle has endured for ten years; for a decade they have faced each other, sleepless, at the centre of a widening circle of devastation. And when they are done the Moon will be ruined and hurled from the Earth, and much of this world's stock of magic will have been irredeemably reduced..." She pointed to a spot on the horizon; Pero turned his head to see a flickering glow, like the rise of an uncertain sun. Sira said, "The wizards are half a world away from us, yet even here their battle-spells reach out... the spells are like hunting animals, with bones and sinews woven of magic, seeking and destroying any vestige of life."

Pero nodded. "I figured that Mathri could only damage the spell-Books by interfering in their very creation. So that meant he had to have a gateway to the days of the Moon Wars... But how has such power come into his hands?"

Sira shrugged. "He bought it, of course. I suspect that a stray blast from the warring wizards created these gateways through time in the first place; in their careless vandalism the wizards have damaged – not

just the bodies of Earth and Moon – but the very fabric of history... When Mathri, already powerful and rich, learned of the gateways' existence, he realized their potential immediately and was prepared to pay fortunes to obtain them."

"And now he's using them to interfere with the transcription of the wizards' spells into the Books."

"He's trying to. He's sent back Brot a number of times, to locate and murder the scribe before the transcriptions can be made. He's not yet found the scribe—"

"But the power of the Books are nevertheless weakened."

"Yes, Pero." She regarded the flowing water solemnly. "It seems that time, unlike this river, is not a simple stream; it is as if the provenance of the Books is responding to Mathri's intentions – as if cringing before his destructive determination."

Pero settled back into the grass. "You know, I doubt if I could have come to understand all this if it hadn't been for that damn waterfall stunt. To have the power of such creations as the gateways – and then to trivialize them into a lounge decoration, however spectacular –"

"And to publish its image on beer-bottle labels." Sira laughed. "This is perhaps Mathri's most significant failing. Power is not sufficient for him; he must be able to flaunt it in the face of his foes."

Pero twisted his head to look at her. "And is that how he sees you? As a symbol of his power over the Families?"

"Yes." She dropped her head. "He doesn't need me; he has no use for me... save continually to humiliate me, and through me my father, and the Families."

"Is that why you followed me through the gateway?"

She smiled. "I've considered it often. But I have never had the courage to gamble a dismal present against an uncertain, unknown past... When I saw that you'd tricked Kotu, that you were brave enough to gamble, I could not help but follow."

"Yeah, but I'm a lousy gambler," he said ruefully. "My worst failing. Didn't anyone tell you?" He shrugged. "Anyway, this was the only way to confirm the theory I was building up about Kotu's power. And, maybe, to do something about stopping him." He looked around, feeling a little helpless. "Although I'm not sure what, at the moment."

As if on cue a huge, leonine voice bellowed from the direction of the river. "Sira! Ss-i-ra!"

They turned to see Brot, Kotu's human killer, stalking out of the rushing stream, dripping grimy water.

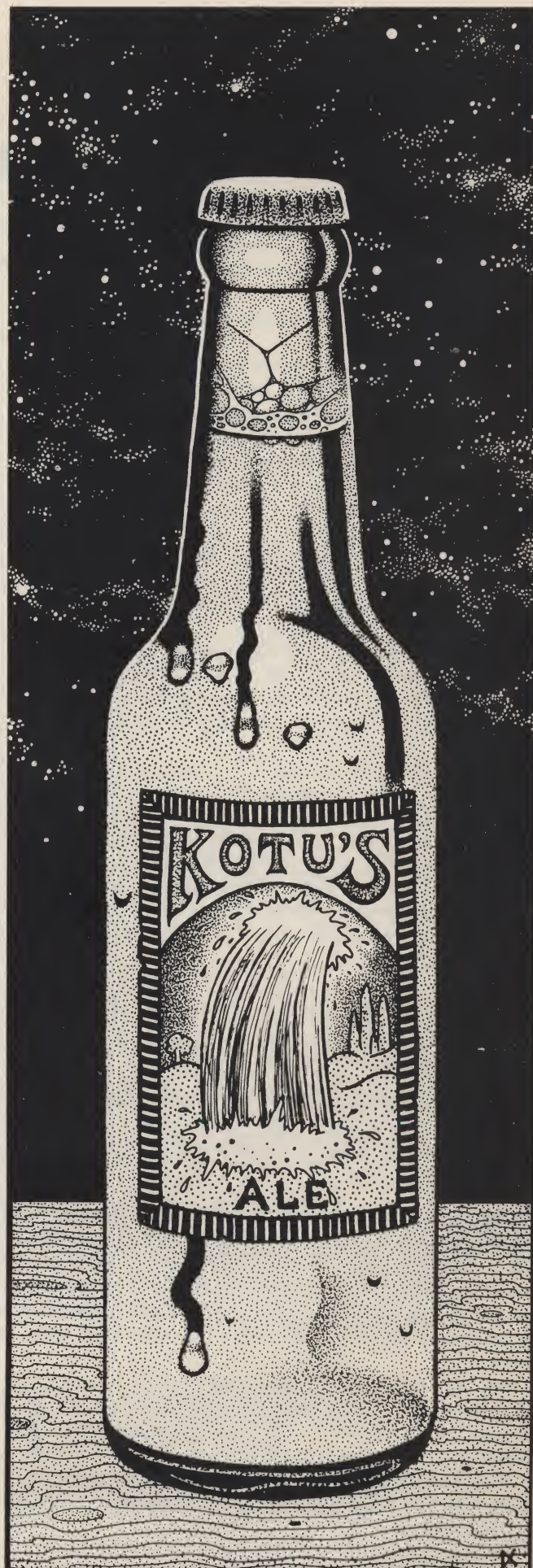
Sira gasped, her hands flying to her mouth. "Brot! Kotu's sent him to kill us..."

But Pero was grinning. "Don't be afraid," he whispered. He sat up and waved to Brot. "My dear chap! How nice to see you."

When the human saw the grinning elf, his biceps visibly bunched into ham-sized mounds inside his sodden jacket, and he growled.

Pero called, "Looks as if your dip did you good. But I can still see a few tidemarks, my friend. Maybe you need a few more baths... don't forget to clean the riverbed out behind you, will you?"

Now Brot made out Sira beside the elf, and Pero saw the human's face twist with a mixture of two kinds of anticipatory lust. He threw back his huge head and bellowed.



There was an ominous rumble from the battle-glowing horizon.

Pero yelled as loudly as he could. "Come on, Brot, you're not frightening me at all. Can't you do any better?"

The giant human, now fully emerged from the river, raised his clenched fists to the hot sky and, his huge chest heaving, roared with triumph.

The sky above him turned blue-purple, and Brot's yelling was drowned by a screaming that seemed to engulf them from all parts of the earth and sky.

Sira threw herself flat against the earth; Pero followed suit.

The wave of magical energy exploded over them, rumbled to echoes, subsided; the blue-violet bruise faded from Pero's clenched eyes.

Carefully he sat up once more. Where Brot had stood there was only a smoking, scorched ring of grass. Pero sighed. "What a loss," he said.

Sira clutched his arm. "Pero...look. The river! What's happening to it?"

Between the discontinuities in level which marked the sites of Kotu's two gateways, the water churned and foamed, sloshing back and forth like boiling water in a pan.

"It must have been that last magical assault," Pero shouted to the girl over the noise. "I think the gateways have become unstable; they're going to close—"

She nodded. "Then you've achieved what you came for, haven't you, Pero?"

He looked at her, surprised. "... Yes. I guess I have. Come on, we have to get back through before we're stranded, here in the past."

"No." She pulled her small hand away from his. "You go. I still have my work to do, here."

He stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

"You still haven't worked it out, have you?" She smiled at him, almost fondly. "I thought you were so clever, too."

"But —"

"Pero, that gate is closing." She stared at him, her face imploring. "Hurry. Please."

Frowning, Pero stood and moved away from her. "Are you sure?"

She nodded wearily. "Pero... will you give Riva my love?"

Pero nodded dumbly, turned and dove into the river.

Pero tumbled through five feet from the closing gateway to the stone floor of Kotu's keep. He landed close to the couch from which he'd made his fateful leap through time; the couch, he saw, distracted by mundane detail after such a dazzling experience, was still piled with the empty accounts books.

He picked himself up, slowly. The waterfall, though still operating, was now a spectacular, chaotic stream which showered the walls and furniture with clinging river water and mud.

Kotu stalked towards Pero, his expensive suit dripping wet, his long face shocked, unreadable. "What have you done?"

Pero looked him up and down, grinning. "Kotu, you look wetter than I feel." He pointed up at the

gateways, which pulsed like mouths now, spitting and spraying water. "Don't miss the show," he said.

Kotu, evidently bewildered, looked up at the remnants of his waterfall.

The top gateway closed completely now, and a last spray of muddy droplets showered over the upturned faces of the two elves. The bottom gateway, shorn of its cloak of mist, could clearly be seen as a horizontal hoop which glowed with ancient Sunlight; the hoop was expanding and contracting violently, from a palm's-breadth to shoulder-height.

On a sudden impulse, Pero picked up the pile of accounts books and a handful of quills from the couch and hurled them through the quivering portal. Kotu watched him, bemused. "What did you do that for?"

"Oh, I don't know. I just thought Sira might find some use for them."

The dilations of the portal grew steadily more violent until the boundary was moving almost too fast to see; and then, with a hiss like an intake of breath and amid a last spray of ancient river-droplets, the portal closed like a mouth.

The room was suddenly quiet, dark, cold.

Pero faced Kotu. "Well, that's that," he said cheerfully.

Kotu's face was like a thundercloud. "You have destroyed my waterfall. I should —" Then, oddly, his expression changed to one of sly calculation. "I had you in my grasp," he said. "How was it physically possible for you to betray me? There is no more potent threat than withholding an alcoholic's drug from him..."

Pero shrugged. "Maybe. But I'm no alcoholic." He grinned. "You're not alone in thinking that...and I don't try to discourage the rumour. Misdirection, you see. You shouldn't believe everything you hear, Mathri. Yes, I've a weakness which has got me into a lot of trouble...and which has cost me most of my money in the past —"

"Well?"

"I'm a gambler, Kotu. Uncontrollable. But not a drunk." Pero grinned. "This affair — diving into an unknown world through that gateway — the whole thing has been a kind of gamble for me, from the start. Quite irresistible...Do you see?"

Kotu's eyes narrowed; he seemed to be pouring a lifetime of hatred into that single gaze, Pero thought.

Pero sighed. "Think about yourself, trader. I've just smashed your life's ambition. And yet the first thing you are interested in is why your attempt to manipulate me failed." He found some pity in his voice. "You're really a very small, very limited person, Mathri."

"I should kill you," the trader said.

Pero nodded. "But Brot is dead. Even his ashes are lost, a thousand generations away. It's finished, Mathri."

Mathri Kotu reached up with hands like claws, his face a mask of hatred; Pero held his ground and stared into the trader's face.

After a long moment Kotu dropped his hands; his head slumped to his sodden chest.

"Mathri Kotu may still be a threat to you," Pero told Riva. "But I doubt if he has access to any more magical power. Only trade — economic power — will enable him to

defeat you." Riva was looking at him with some contempt, Pero thought. He said impatiently, "Look, Riva, maybe you have lessons to learn from this episode. Mathri Kotu is half-insane... but at least he's looking to the future. Haven't the rest of us got to do the same? The influence of magic on the affairs of the world has been declining since the time of the Moon Wars. And it must continue to decline, despite the respite I've earned you. If we're to survive, mustn't we learn to work with the humans, and the other races of the world... and, necessarily, on their terms?"

"Thank you for the lecture," Riva said stiffly, looking utterly unconvinced. "Tell me something," he said. "Whatever else you are, Pero Perotel, you are no hero."

"Thanks very much," Pero growled.

"So why, then, did you return to Kotu's lair in that fashion? You must have known the odds were against your success."

Pero smiled sadly. "Just how I like it."

"What?"

"Never mind... Riva, I simply decided that the gateway had to be destroyed, if possible. Not to save Tropus, and your damn Families, necessarily. But the power to alter history – in the wrong hands – was a threat I didn't think I could live with."

"Wrong hands? The hands of another Kotu, perhaps?"

"Maybe. Or," Pero said harshly, "the hands of the Council of Families. Maybe there are no 'right' hands, for such a power. Think about that, my friend."

Riva dropped his eyes. "And Sira is lost."

Pero found sympathy moving in him, but he said harshly, "At least we know she lived on, in the past. We have her transcriptions to prove that. But, old man, she was lost to you from the moment you sold her to Kotu."

Riva swung a harsh, bitter stare on him. "You are a damn fool, Pero. I lost her many years ago. Do you think I'm blind? Do you think I couldn't recognize my own daughter's handwriting, in those ancient Books?"

Pero gasped. "Then you knew –"

"I had no idea how this would come to pass, but I've known her fate since she grew to adulthood. And, I suspect, so has she. And so, when Mathri Kotu demanded to take her from me... when the opportunity came to place her close to the heart of the greatest threat to the Books... I knew I had to take it." The old elf's strong chin was trembling now, and his eyes were pools of light. "Do you understand yet, you young barbarian? Do... you... understand?"

Pero said to Doga, "This place just isn't the same without Waterfall beer, my friend." He peered into the murky depths of the tankard of Doga's home-brewed ale, sighed, and took another draught. "Well, I'll have to make do."

Doga, polishing glasses, grunted.

Pero said, "You know, you remind me of someone. A charming chap called Brot. Any relation?"

Doga was spared replying by a sudden commotion from the entrance to the bar,

"Pero! Pero!"

Pero turned to see a young elf, little more than a child, come bursting into the bar. "Hari!" Pero called,

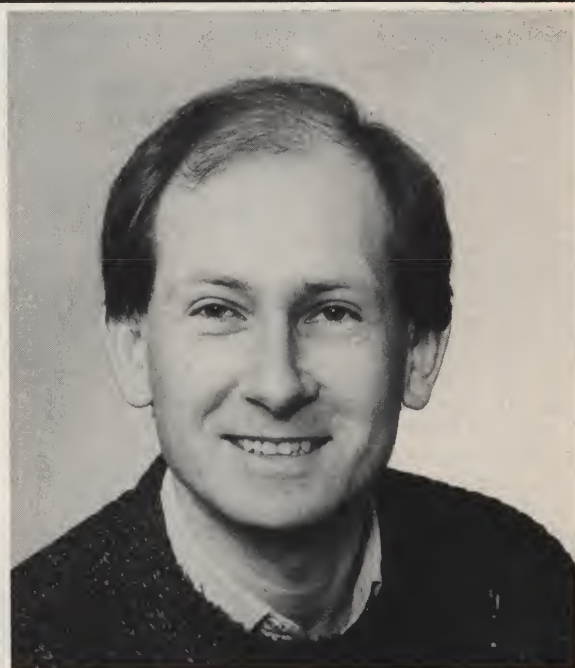
smiling. "What's the rush?"

"A new case for you," the young elf said. His eyes were wide. "The Council of Families is in uproar. There's been a murder... and in the Chamber itself." He plucked at Pero's sleeve. "What will you do, Pero? What will you do?"

Pero sighed and placed his half-full glass on the bar. "What a shame," he said insincerely. "Duty calls –"

"You want me to save this for you?" Doga asked seriously.

Pero grinned. "I suppose it's worth a gamble; it can't get any worse." He walked from the bar, his arm around the child's shoulders. "Now, then, Hari; get your breath and tell me all about it –"



Stephen Baxter is one of Britain's leading new authors of Hard SF (see his novel *Raft*, 1991). But he is also a dab hand at light magical fantasy, as his tales "The Star Boat" (in the "Warhammer" anthology *Ignorant Armies* ed. D. Pringle, 1989) and "The Strongest Armour" (in the "Midnight Rose" anthology *Villains!* ed. M. Gentle and R. Kaveney, 1992) go to show. His last appearances in *Interzone* were with the sf stories "George and the Comet" (issue 52) and "The Gödel Sunflowers" (issue 55).

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Come, Adam, This Time the Berries are Sweet

John Clute

In our lives, as we know, Eden takes the past tense. It is only afterwards, in any case, that we call it Eden. In the midst of life, while we remain active and full of that biologically predetermined sense of uniqueness which guarantees the species-specific orthodoxy of our every act, we give the driving force within us all sorts of names, but I will call it the Word. During the years of vigour, we do not seek to separate ourselves from the Word which comprises the wiring diagram of the soul, the perceptual matrix which ties the ego to the raw things of the world and charges the raw things of the world to obey the patterns that make us whole. It is, of course, a high and terrible charge we lay upon the raw things of the world. "Oh bless the continuous stutter," says Leonard Cohen in a song from the 1979 album, "Of Word being made into flesh," the damned fool. Because that stutter is the sound of Progress, a chewing sound.

It is only afterwards – or when the slow-lane among us escape into a book – that we discover some inherent gap between the wiring diagram of the soul and the flesh it purges. It is only then we discover that the Word within us – that which uncton-rutter Christians still designate the Soul, the possession of which (some of them continue to assert) excuses anything we might do to the world – may have been a growth in the corridors of power of the grossly overextended human brain, a puppet-master tumour so huge it swells the head, forces us upright so we can balance it inside our swollen skulls, drives homo sapiens into the interminable ravening loose-cannon neoteny that marks us Cain, and against which nothing is safe, not the "beast," nor the water meadows, nor the Mother. It is only afterwards, when we have retired, or hit a siding, or learned to read, that we begin to need to forgive ourselves. It is then we discover that the name of the growth within the skull was always Eden, which we then associate with the fine immortal bliss of childhood we are supposed to have experienced before language divorced us from the omnipotence of infancy; or the nostalgia we feel for all we have eaten; or the self-pitying ecstasy that wells in our

bosom at the thought of being able to leave *something* alone. Anything at all. Eden is the alibi of the Word. All true art hovers, therefore, on the cusp of alibi: for it is neither here nor there, now nor when, rent nor whole. True Art is Janus-faced: To tell a story is to leave Eden (just as to tell about utopia is to create its dark twin), but to remember a story is to return.

Let us return, for instance, to the Discworld. In an essay in *Interzone* 33, in a review of *Guards! Guards!* (1989) in the same issue, and one of *Moving Pictures* (1990) in *Interzone* 45, I have myself gone on a good deal about Terry Pratchett and the nature of True Comedy, which I said exemplified the *da capo* nature of storytelling, that face of Art which took us home again. The Comedy of Terry Pratchett's Discworld, I said, was a "tournament of return," sort of thing. I then went on mildly to disparage a tendency I thought I discerned in *Guards! Guards!* to "transcend" the crystalline shape of True Comedy, and to attempt to take on the threatening world-addressing saliencies of the novel (the greatest examples of which threaten us with the face of Art that sees the intolerable otherness of the new in a grain of sand, before falling back into the memory of the page).

The Discworld tales, I thought, were too perfect – and, perhaps, too minor – to wear that face. Later, in *Moving Pictures*, I thought I saw something else going slightly adrift: The protagonists of that story seemed too stupid to understand the plot they were embroiled in; but the book turned on a plot that only really made sense if its potential outcomes were sussed by characters clever enough to understand the dangers it represented, and who were thus armed to defuse those dangers. It was perhaps commendable of Pratchett (I thought) to ban from the Discworld any protagonist whose sharpness of intellect might do more harm than good, might (for instance) question the premise (or turtle) upon which the edifice rested whole. But it also disparaged the Discworld to leave its defence – every new tale set in a continuing world is necessarily a

defence of that world – to dolts, as if to depict a protagonist with brains would break the illusion.

So I gave the Discworld a rest, even in my own private reading. *Reaper Man* (1991) was reviewed in *Interzone* 51 by Paul McAuley, and *Witches Abroad* (1991) in *Interzone* 56 by Ken Brown. The latter novel featured a plot about the nature of Story, just as this current review seems to be, but almost certainly in an entirely different sense. We come to **Small Gods** (Gollancz, £13.99), number thirteen in the series, which has driven me back to its immediate predecessors to see what I'd missed, because *Small Gods* is surely the best novel Terry Pratchett has ever written, and the best comedy. It is a tale of very considerable grimness set in a desert theocracy run by world-despising clergymen (women need not apply) and torturers whose resemblance to Christians in their prime (which was 1497, Torquemada and Savonarola both dying in 1498) and to Moslems in theirs (1992) cannot be accidental: for the religion that dominates the theocracy of Omnia is monotheistic, condemns any form of free-thinking, condemns women, condemns sex, condemns the arts, condemns beauty, condemns laughter, condemns nature, condemns the Discworld, and condemns Truth (for it insists that the world is round, and orbits the sun). The theocracy of Omnia is in the business of transforming Eden into Word. *Small Gods* is surely a novel.

It is also a Comedy. Though the protagonist of the book is a saint, who is tortured (very briefly), and though he changes and grows throughout the text, the gravitas of pain and maturation does little to disguise the essential Pratchett protagonist within. Brutha (a Brother) is, like so many of his predecessors, an enormous bumpkin and dupe, close to witless but cheerful, or so it seems. He is also memorable: he can forget nothing. And he is so transported by the dazzle of words and the purling infinitudes of reality and the clamour of the gods that he actually believes in Om, the god of Omnia, being the only person left on the Discworld to believe in this particular god, who does exist. But the gods of the Discworld (like Tinkerbell) flourish according to the degree of belief accorded them. When belief grows, small gods – of whom there are billions – can swiftly become revered deities, with the power to heal and to destroy; but when belief fades, so do they. Om has faded. Having ill-advisedly attempted a spot of kenosis (a theological term for taking on the burden of the flesh: what gods do when they want to joy-ride) Om discovers that there is only enough belief left in the Discworld to incarnate him as a tortoise.

But Brutha, who believes in Om, hears his cries for help, and the tortoise henceforth speaks within his head, a secret sharer. At the same time, Brutha's supernal innocence, for he seems both clueless and blessed, has intrigued Vorbis, the murderous torturer who runs the inquisition and the empire itself, and the plot begins to move.

The hilariousness of the book derives from the usual incremental repetition of jokes and turns, the usual precision of language and timing, but also from the fact that *Small Gods* works as a cunning, cagey parody of Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*: both novels are about religion, the nature of god (or gods); both feature memorious protagonists with secret-sharer voices inside their heads and an ambiguous relationship to torture who go on great circular quests into war zones and return to rule the empire. But the heart of the book does not lie in the parody chase. *Small Gods* is at heart a tale about the preservation of the Discworld. It is a comedy about remaining a Comedy. Vorbis wishes to conquer the rest of the land – to transform not only Omnia but all of the Discworld into a free enterprise zone for the profit of the Word – and to do so he has fastened upon a campaign to force all other countries and peoples to admit to the fact that the world is round, just as it is claimed to be in the scriptures of Omnia. Sailors and philosophers who maintain that the world is a disc riding upon the back of a turtle are tortured, forced to recant like Galileo in 1616, when he finally admitted to the Inquisition that the world did not move around the sun. As good Christians know to their disgust, however, Galileo reneged. After his formal recantation he whispered sotto voce to the world (which heard him): "Eppur si muove." Still it moves. On the Discworld it is an almost identical whisper: "The Turtle moves."

Now and then, there is a moment of bitterness from the god, but Brutha answers him:

"There you are," said Om, a note of bitter triumph in his voice. "You don't know. That's what stops everyone going mad, the uncertainty of it, the feeling that it might work out all right after all. But it's different for gods. We do know. You know that story about the sparrow flying through a room?"

"No..."

"About life being like a sparrow flying through a room? Nothing but darkness outside? And it flies through the room and there's just a moment of warmth and light?"

"There are windows open?" said Brutha.

He is not, in truth, asking a question. He is saying that everything is real. He is saying that the sparrow will do one

thing, and then the next thing. The utterly unChristian innocence of his absorption into the world and his love for the world only deepens as he moves towards autarky, as the god and the creature move slowly back to Omnia, after their quest. They defeat Vorbis, who is taken by Death. Brutha binds Om to a code of laws which force him to be ethical, and rules for 100 years, which pass in the blinking of an eye, just as Little Louis' long life passes in the turning of a page at the end of Georges Simenon's *The Little Saint* (1965; trans 1966). Within the compass of his gaze, the Discworld is safe, the Turtle moves. Within the compass of our reading of *Small Gods*, we are in the present tense of Eden.

Another book about Eden, Emma Tennant's **Faustine** (Faber and Faber, £13.99), sets the Faust story in the 20th century, where a middle-aged woman named Muriel Twyman – disappeared from the roll of real people by time's passage through her caving female body – succumbs to the Devil's blandishments, and returns to the Eden of eternal youth for 24 years. But the Eden which she enters is mortuary, and the two decades of her supremacy over the world as a clone of Elizabeth Taylor are solitudinous and arid: or so we are intended, it would seem, to guess. There is no telling for sure in this very brief, frost-palsied, weirdly sidesaddle book, which is told, long after the fact, through the eyes of Muriel's seemingly love-ravenous and self-centred (but in fact destroyed) grand-daughter, who returns from exile in Australia to find her, longing for love but totally unlovable and unloving, a victim of the dry-ice extrusions of Muriel's damnation.

Fragments of story drop into the grand-daughter's chill and resistant sensorium, and we begin to feel a modicum of pity for her closed self. Muriel is never seen until, fragmented in a mirror, her face is glimpsed at the very end of the book, which then collapses in upon her like a house of cards, desolately. The fragments of the fall are all we read, the dead skin of Eden, told from long long ago. *Faustine* is as old a book as it is possible to hold in the hand, and no more forthcoming about the allure it mourns than a laundry list in Linear B. Touch it and age.

It is not a new thought that Nazi Germany will live forever, and Robert Harris has not had a new thought in **Fatherland** (Hutchinson, £14.99). Like most alternate histories of the 20th century, he has worked out an hypothesis or two – in his case a few mild twitches at events in 1942 – which allows Hitler to win World War Two, and his readers to enjoy – in the amoral solitude of the act of reading – a victorious Reich, a corrupt but highly photo-

genic obergruppenfuhrerlederhosen-fabrikengesellschaft (or leather sock shop), hierarchies and Mercedes Benzes and architecture by Albert Speer, and aged faces steeped like tea in corruption.

We have seen the like before, long ago. Sarban and Philip K. Dick and Keith Roberts and Len Deighton – and a hundred more – have found the awful aesthetic of the Nazi presentation of self too tempting to ignore; and have done something with it. What Harris does, with a very considerable degree of skill, is very nearly nothing. The story he tells quite excellently – in 1964 a gloomy, highly intelligent police detective whose life is falling apart finds a suspicious body, the Gestapo hierarchy becomes involved, the cop refuses to stop investigating, and quite excitingly the obscenity at the root of the system is exposed – almost entirely lacks extrapolative content, and has therefore almost nothing to say about the obscenity – it is, of course, the Final Solution – it burrows towards. You think of *Gorky Park* (1981) by Martin Cruz Smith, or of anything by Frederick Forsyth, but not hard. It was nice to see which Kennedy was president in 1964, but not much fun to think that otherwise it was the same old world. The invert Eden of Nazi Germany needs more prodding than this.

A man named Pablo is shot. He dies. He awakens on a vast plain, along with all the humans ever born, stark naked, but no longer aroused by breasts and buttocks, for the time of the Last Judgment is upon him. So far there is nothing new, and Piero Scanziani's **The White Book** (1969, Italy; Eureka Publishers of Windsor, £14.99), though clearly written in a style of swift lucid poignance, and translated into an English of liquid urgency by Linda Lappin, seems at first to lack much in the way of novelty. Then we enter a kind of hut, where Pablo and a black girl and a Chinese peasant are told they have been selected to defend Adam and Eve before the final court, and we see that this court consists of a quincunx of masked magistrates, and we realize that it is not novelty that we must seek. We must find wisdom or leave the book. We find wisdom.

Pablo remembers fragments of his life, as do the other two defenders; and in recesses between sessions of the trial all three hear the exemplary confessions of other human beings, all of whom adhere passionately to the hooks of the stories that tell them, as would anyone. In each story there are understandings and misunderstandings, joinings and solitudes, moral conundrums it is beyond human capacity to parse in the time given us to understand the race of life, and a

death at the end. It is a chaos, a congeries, an anthem, a susurrus.

The trial proceeds. Adam and Eve are exiles from Eden. Eve gives birth in grief and joy to the children who will populate the earth, and Adam searches for some way to return to Eden. There is nothing new in any of this. We know about the incest. We know that Cain will kill Abel. We know – for Scanziani allows us the knowledge in a thousand ways, as he tricks us through this brilliant book – that the only judgment we as readers can make is the judgment of Brutha: “The windows are open?” For the only thing a human being can truly accomplish is to do the next thing. Adam steps off the edge of a cliff, calling Eden, Eden. It was the next thing. How can he be judged? The defenders, Pablo and the two other humans, approach the judges. Behind the masks the gods have fled, or never were. The room of judgment is empty of gods. There is a white book, which the chief magistrate had consulted. It will surely contain the wisdom of the gods, their indictment, their Word. It is blank. Everyone leaves. Adam and Eve have returned to the beginning. They are exiles from Eden. Adam says they must return to Eden. Eve says she is hungry, it is only human. As the book ends she speaks, joyfully, to Adam. “Come Adam,” she says, “this time the berries are sweet.”

(John Clute)

Kiddilit? Mary Gentle

Nobody seems to know how to spell fuck these days.

Here's Greg Bear in *Anvil of Stars*, (Legend, £8.99) and his characters say “slick” and “slicking.” And in John Barnes' *Orbital Resonance* (Tor, \$17.95) they use “bok” and “bokking.” Fine. One may suppose that in the bright new skiffy future there will be new expletives deleted. One of Heinlein's characters in *The Door Into Summer*'s future remarks something to the effect that no one wrote “kink” up on walls in his day. But it takes time for a word to go from strictly descriptive with no moral opprobrium – the Anglo-Saxons, bless 'em, called the hawk a wind-fucker, for reasons obvious to anyone who has seen it in action; this got bowdlerized to wind-hover some centuries later – to a word at which moralists turn pale, and which provides the emotional charge necessary when one really needs to use it.

Slick off? Bokkup? It don't cut it.

I suspect the usage has far more to do with mid-western American librarians than it does with linguistic speculation. And possibly much to do with nervous editors who fear their

books won't get on the shelves if they include “language.” For all I know, writers are doing the censorship themselves, before it even hits the page. The reason this affects science fiction more than the mainstream may be, of course, that sf is perceived as having a young and impressionable target audience who need to be “protected” – that in fact, as Thomas Disch remarked some time ago, science fiction is a branch of children's literature.

John Barnes' *Orbital Resonance* wants it both ways. The protagonist is twelve, going on thirteen, one Melpomene Murray; a bright kid being brought up with other bright kids on a space station after Earth has suffered every man-made, climatic, and disease-ridden disaster you can think of. Most of the characters are pubertal or pre-pubertal, although this does turn out to have a cast-iron plot reason behind it. Carried like a talisman through the text is *Catcher in the Rye*, and Melpomene might like to aspire to be Holden Caulfield, but ends up closer to Podkayne of Mars. Curiously enough, for all the precocious sex scattered among offstage characters, the novel is less adult in its treatment of adolescents than either of its antecedents. Melpomene has but a chaste, touching romance with Randy, aka Randomly Generated, Schwartz.

There's some nice stuff going on here. There's a kiddilit explanation of why we need unions. Somewhere offstage Mars is going to be terraformed. The *Flying Dutchman* station itself is a joint American and Japanese project. The education of the children, for consensus rather than conflict, seems based squarely on the Western idea of how the Japanese raise their kids; the perceived problems – lack of originality, tendency to be easily turned into a mob – are again integral to the plot.

The *Flying Dutchman*'s culture is based on one's hierarchical standing in the group, but, that standing is achieved by group efforts rather than individual. It does at least put a new spin on the old sf trope of superbright kids. Melpomene and her peers are sentimentalists of a particular kind. Show them suffering and dying humans on Earth and their reaction is indifference. Show them cute oxen being used to pull ploughs and they lose sleep over it. This may or may not be a thinly-disguised allegory of the Third World.

All the adults we get to see here are parents, literally; some of them being psychiatrists who probe deep into their children's emotional lives. Everybody cries on the space station, without shame: adults and children, female and male. Everybody speaks their emotional minds about how much they like and trust each other. I have a suspicion that British reserve

would be whisked off to the psychs and treated, instantly, without the option; which gives a nice feel of another culture, although some of the digging into preadolescent heads smacks of psychological abuse.

What *Orbital Resonance* does have, finally, is a lot of resonances with the school story. The apparent mainspring of the plot is new-boy-from-Earth-meets-class-bully. Theophilus brings a lot of old American habits with him – peer pressure, cliques, malice. One hardly needs the what's-really-being-done-to-the-children hidden agenda when the book toddles along quite nicely as boarding-school-adventures-in-space.

Greg Bear's *Anvil of Stars* also has teenagers in space. The novel has the traditional shape of skiffy, that shape that I guess has caused it to be regarded as children's literature, or, to be more perfectly accurate, that brand of adolescent literature which has abandoned a child's unhypocritical honesty, and rejected the adult's knowledge that it is always more complicated than you think it is, in favour of galactic-scale power fantasies. *Anvil of Stars* is the sequel to *The Forge of God*, in which Earth was destroyed (this seems to be happening a lot recently) by self-replicating killing machines sent out by an unknown star-going civilization. Saved on an ark by the Benefactors, surviving humanity is informed of an interstellar *lex talionis*: the attacking civilization must be hunted down and exterminated. Most of *Anvil of Stars* is about that hunt, some moral worrying about whether this law is acceptable, the destruction of several planets in a number of different solar systems, and wonderful nanotechnological gadgets. There is some nicely calculated doubt about what exactly the humans may have done...

But, *Anvil of Stars* has teenage protagonists, and it's hard to see why. The girls are referred to as Wendys, the boys as Lost Boys, and their elected leader as Pan. The ship is the *Dawn Treader*. Robot “Moms” lend aid and assistance. We are in the land of Twee. A lot of casual sex goes on, except that it doesn't where it counts, which is to say, with the viewpoint characters. Our hero, Martin, gives up his homosexual lover – with very liberal-minded indications that this is not because gay love is inferior, no way, it just doesn't turn him on like straight sex – and has, again, a singularly chaste affair with his true love, a mind-bogglingly supportive girl called Theresa. There is a much more interesting and semi-adult relationship between Martin and bolshy Ariel, one of the Wendys who thinks, not without reason, that the high-tech Benefactors are dribbling out both

knowledge and technology to the Earthlings in bite-sized kiddie-chunks.

There's a whole lot of good stuff in *Anvil*: the sheer scale of the journey, nanotech wonders, and the debate about whether or not one should exterminate one's enemies, and what one might turn into, doing it. Best of all, there are the aliens who join forces with them from another Ship of the Law. Committee intelligences, they are composed of "cords" – yard-long centipedes – which coalesce into the intelligent form, called "braids." The braids' natural communication is by smell, and all their jokes have a punchline about involuntary relapse into cord-form. Bear calls them "Brothers," unfortunately; after which one has trouble reading them as anything else but token Black Sidekicks. Ignore that as hard as you can, they're actually the most fun in the book.

The thing I never worked out was why the Ship of the Law couldn't be staffed by adult, mature humans. Even genuine adolescents would have been fine, with all their typhoon-level emotional ragnaroks and insecurities. But we get sanitized young people. We get terribly restrained power-struggles, and a murder offstage. *Anvil of Stars* flees any kind of engagement with real emotions. It is that kind of science fiction. What that kind of sf is, in point of fact, is not so much children's literature as *bad* children's literature. Go read *Huckleberry Finn*.

By strange coincidence I have here the latest Thomas M. Disch, *The M.D.* (HarperCollins, £14.99), which is not at all children's literature, despite following its protagonist from the age of six to adulthood, with the main focus on childhood and adolescence. *The M.D.* is subtitled "A Horror Story." Things being what they are, I suspect this means it will be marketed as category horror fiction, which is not necessarily where you would expect to find the author of *Camp Concentration*. Needless to say, *The M.D.* is not genre. You could get it in under the rubric of sf, or, if you tucked and strained, under mainstream. It doesn't feed the same appetite as Stephen King.

We open at Christmas. Billy Michaels is still quite a little boy when Sister Mary Symphorosa feels it her sacred duty to tell him that there isn't any Santa Claus. Santa Claus is a pagan idol, from which six year olds should be saved. Unfortunately for unconvinced Billy, in the first grief of this knowledge, he runs away out into the American winter city – and is spoken to. By Santa Claus. Who explains: "'Well, you should just have lied and said what she wanted you to say.'

"'But lying's wrong.'

"'– Not to someone like Sister Symphorosa. Lying is only wrong with someone you trust.'"

Sure as hell ain't like no Santa Claus you ever met. *The M.D.* wants to tread all over the idols of modern hypocrisy, and it starts by hitting home where we didn't think it necessary to defend. The idea of Santa Claus telling you to lie is shocking: we unbelievers each still carry a six-year-old within.

Moving right along, we begin to suspect this is a disguise for an older avatar. The god that Billy has met, and will continue to meet through his childhood and adolescence, is Mercury, he of the winged feet and the caduceus, patron of doctors, thieves and liars. Cynically, one might regard that as a tautology. For Billy, early on, it's all wish-fulfilment. He is allowed to make a caduceus out of a dead bird on a stick, one that has the power to do good (if charged with ill action), and vice versa. Equal and opposite reaction.

Horror?

Billy plans to curse the child who is bullying him by wishing – with a rhyme that makes the god-power work – that whoever next touches the stick shall become like the mongol child he sees each day as he walks to school. However, it isn't Billy's tormentor who next picks up the stick, but someone much closer to home...

Come to think of it, this could have been a standard shlock horror novel. Boy with power to curse let loose on unsuspecting world: yeah, been there, done that. But Mercury makes the difference. *The M.D.* is a Mercurial book. Billy has been given the power of death and life. Mercury is a liar. Remember those two facts when, later in life, Billy becomes a doctor, able to heal and dish out the ills that flesh is heir to on command – almost. Things have a habit of not going quite as anyone expects. Mercury wants his prayers, and Mercury wants his fun. There is a lot of rough fun in *The M.D.*

Billy at six has a brightly-coloured life, made up of Halloweens, his brother's illness, school life, and the executions and palace revolutions of Wyomia (populated by different-coloured bowling pins). One used to call this mainstream, but it is perfectly at home here, in whatever kind of novel this finally turns out to be. The blood – there is the most horrifically painful scene involving the string of a kite – and the terror are on an everyday level. The text does not address Billy from a distance, or create of him a miniature adult who has forgotten the powerlessness of childhood. For a god to come to a child is, as one forgets in the pastures of wish-fulfilment literature starring child-protagonists, shooting fish in a barrel.

Billy moves on from child to adolescent, with his first wet dream – a dream about having to autopsy a cadaver, which "hadn't been anything like wet dreams were supposed to be, it wasn't

about sex at all"; a neat reflexive comment on the writing of horror, and the dual capabilities of Mercury's staff. The world moves on from Watergate to the present day to near future. William Michaels becomes a doctor who supports the tobacco industry, who makes his private millions here and there. A plague rages, the sick are interned, the shadow of AIDS looms over the text... and Malthus. William cures and kills and grows rich.

There will be a descent to hell – but it is unclear how many people will make it.

The M.D. is at one and the same time a religious book prepared to give equal time, in terms of sympathy and satire, to Catholic and fundamentalist characters; and a rationalist book in which explanations will not be offered in terms of the miraculous. What makes it adult, finally, is the tentativeness with which one says that. Ambiguity and doubt abide. Does the career of Billy Michaels provide evidence that humankind is irrevocably sinful, stupid, and in need of divine salvation? Or does it prove that the gods are malicious, humans powerless, and the best you can hope for in the face of adversity is fortitude?

Yes.

The determining principle of *The M.D.*'s universe is irony.

As experiment will show, children have little sense of it. You have to get a bit older before you can understand irony. And older than that, even, to like it. (Mary Gentle)

Some Good Fantasy and Horror

Wendy Bradley

One day David Gemmell will write a great book. *Morningstar* (Legend, £8.99) is not that book but it is sufficiently better than his usual stuff to point the way and show that he has more in him than the reliable, solid-selling, name-in-gold-bigger-than-the-title master craftsman we have come to know.

Morningstar begins as the tale told in old age by a bard, Owen Odell, of his association with the hero Morningstar, aka Jack Mace, adventurer and desperado. Mace assumes the character of the heroic Morningstar in cynicism and opportunism but finds that events conspire to make him live up to his own legend, and this part of the story had me reaching for superlatives. However, the novel is broken-backed with the interpolation of some sketchy tosh about vampyre kings rising again, a search for skulls guarded by ringwearers and the vampyres' defeat using casually introduced

magic weapons. The novel picks up again at the end with a conclusion whose overall shape one can foresee but whose details are nevertheless a surprise and a delight.

The story is framed by an awkward device: Odell refuses to tell his story to an arrogant youth who comes to milk him of his history but instead creates a young ghost from the future to whom he can tell the real story while the youth sleeps. The first few paragraphs are directed in second person at the reader, as though we are to be placed inside the skin of the youth, and Gemmell never then manages to pin us where he intends us to sit, inside the shadow of the illusory future, so that the device is irritating although, like the awkward shifts of viewpoint in *Wuthering Heights*, I can't offhand think of a way to do it better, but then that isn't my job.

A word about the cover illustration: for once a piece of cover art which suggests the artist may have read at least some of the book. But shouldn't the wind blow the horse's mane and the banner in the same direction?

Melanie Rawn begins a new set of stories about her *Dragon Prince* characters in **Stronghold** (Dragon Star Book One; Pan; price not given) which might as well be titled "Dragon Prince: the Next Generation." The internal divisions between the workers of magic, "sunrunners" who communicate via sun or moonlight, and the princes led by Rohan and his son Pol, have so far been controllable. However in this novel there is a new stress on the political and personal relationships when an implacable external enemy invades and operates with inscrutable hostility, destroying cities and killing their inhabitants. There is a further problem in that Andry has begun to teach the commoners that his sunrunners are mediators with the goddess and, effectively, to turn them into a priesthood with all the traditional problems of the division of power between church and state.

My problem with this is that Rawn's prose is stylish but her characters are indistinguishable, and even with the help of the fairly useless index and genealogies I couldn't keep all these Rislyn/Riyan/Rohan/Rohannons straight in my head. Maybe next time as well as the baseball score entry ("Oclel (705-) Devri. m727 Rusina. Father of Surida.") she could add distinguishing marks – or better still sketch them in the text so that we remember them from page to page. The magic also bugs me: Sioned seems to be able to do remarkable feats if necessary to protect her menfolk but on the whole the sunrunners' skills are inconsistent and dependent on the weather. If you could only communicate on a sunny day don't you think you would invent the

telephone? However the novel brought a tear to my eye at the end, which was unexpected.

Filkers should ignore both the awful cover and worse title of **Strum Again?** by Elizabeth Scarborough (Bantam, \$4.99) and rush out and buy it. The devil has managed to banish all music from America but a band of folksingers return from Europe where they have been searching for the roots of their music through some earlier volumes of "The Songkiller Saga" and, with the help of a magic banjo and the faerie queen/debauchery devil start to put it all right. There are cowboy poets, including a Japanese chap who hasn't quite got the hang of it and keeps trying to do cowboy haiku:

Steamin' shit

Upon the land

I pluck rapier cactus spines from my ass

and awkward transitions from one part of the States to another are dealt with by finding a dead phone and calling up the ghost of the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fé. No, really. It is a book that is both joyful and yet deeply serious and I mean to go and search out the previous two volumes.

Finally Whitley Strieber returns to form with a cracker of a horror novel, **Unholy Fire** (Macdonald, £14.99) in which he plays a clever shell game with three Catholic priests – the sixties trendy vicar, the curate who embodies the eighties fundamentalist backlash and the ancient Father Zimmer (I know, I know, but no-one ever mentions the frame) who doesn't speak. Now one of these is possessed by a demon (well there are a few peripheral characters who might be the one but it's fairly soon clear that it's one of the priests) and this particular demon is also a serial killer fond of setting his victims alight either before, during or after the murder. We get inside the demon's head without getting evidence of whose head he's inside, and there are some convincing church politics, a doughty lady cop and some great one-liners ("Kitty Pearson regarded being single as a hobby she didn't have time for"). There are also some less great one-liners ("Woman is the quintessential other, the symbol of everything the male hides in his darkness – his softness, his tears, his vulnerability") and some straightforward crap ("No, he's not even from hell, it's an alien, worse than hell, something from across the black of space...") but on the whole there are no aliens examining anyone's bottom and enough death and horror to give anyone nightmares. The pseudo-psychological explanation at the end is a bit of a wimp-out: demonic possession is enough, surely, without throwing in a bit of child abuse as well? In a novel in which good battles literally with evil it's anti-

climactic to find some whimpering old bastard claiming its all his fault.

(Wendy Bradley)

From Slack Horrors to Fine Historical Fantasy

Ken Brown

It's all fantasy and no elves this time round. Other than that there is no obvious connecting theme, so rather than manufacture one I'll go through the books from the one I liked least to the one I liked best.

In Christopher Pike's **The Season of Passage** (Tor, \$18.99) the first (Russian) space mission to Mars has mysteriously disappeared and a US expedition is sent to find out why. I'm afraid the plot also vanishes in an absurd jumble of vampires, lost cities in the Himalayas, telepathy and plain bad writing. As an unfair example, I quote the scene where the protagonist's boyfriend falls for her (it's only on page 13):

"The clothes he could handle, but the wet hair was too much, particularly because it was so dark to begin with. Black hair on a pale-skinned Caucasian was something that he didn't normally see in nature. It was little things like that that got him in a woman. He stood up and almost fell over."

The Season of Passage never even manages to stand up.

Sorcery in Shad by Brian Lumley ("Tales of the Primal Land, Volume 3"; Headline, £4.50) is set in the most ancient human world, before Atlantis and Mu, in a cosmos which includes Cthulhu, "Yibb-Tstill," and Yogg-Sothoth and other references to the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. But don't expect a Lovecraftian book. You'll find barbarian warriors, decadent cities, magic swords, slave girls, evil alien gods, wizards, monsters, silly names like "Tarra Khash the Hrossak," "Gys Ankh," "Hissiliss" and "Theem'hdra," and frequent use of words like "leathery," "slippery," "invisible," "chains" and "pit." This is a tributary of that stream of story that rises in the region of Edgar Rice Burroughs, becomes a river in the works of Robert E. Howard, flows near to literature somewhere between Fritz Leiber and Michael Moorcock (not very near, I admit) and runs into the gutter with John Norman.

It isn't "The Tower of the Elephant" (the best Conan story, for those not in the know). It is a fast-paced, slightly over-the-top, essentially honest and damn sight better than *Minor Functionaries of Gor* (or whatever the latest slab of sexist rubbish is called).

Not-quite-Elves meet cyberpunk in *Shifter* by Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens, which is Book One of "The Chronicles of Galen Sword" (Roc, £4.50). Galen Sword Pendragon (honest) is a young man, raised as orphan in New York and supported by a vast trust fund of unknown origin. He uses his wealth to recruit and equip a small group of misfits (beautiful Oriental martial-arts expert, wheelchair-bound mad genius and prepubescent telepath from the slums – how did you guess?) to investigate his past. Given that background (and, above all, that name) the perceptive reader is not at all surprised to find that Galen soon runs into a whole invisible city of werewolves and vampires that exists in parallel to the New York we know, around dark corners, at the end of narrow alleyways, behind locked doors in the back of seedy shops. The werebeings don't stand a chance, for not only are our heroes wired for sound and on-line to millions of dollars worth of informatics, they also have spray cans full of silver paint. (I plump for garlic powder myself – it's cheaper.)

Richard Laymon's *Blood Games* (Headline, £15.99) isn't really in *Interzone's* field (although there is a little bit of witchcraft near the end, allowing me to call it a fantasy to excuse reviewing it). Inspired by the film *Same Time Next Year*, five young women who met at college celebrate the anniversary of their graduation with a vacation away from husbands and boyfriends, which they record on videotape, continuing a mildly pornographic fly-on-the-wall documentary of their lives together that started on the day they first met. Each year's trip is organized by a different member of the group. The vacation in question falls to Helen, a horror-film buff who is afraid to enter showers on her own. Naturally she takes the group to a deserted hotel in a remote part of Vermont, notorious as the site of some bloodthirsty murders. For college graduates these women are dumb.

Most of the text is flash-back; to college days and to previous holiday exploits, more after the style of *National Lampoon* or *Animal House* than Stephen King. I enjoyed much of this book, but it got both predictable and unpleasant towards the end. I would actually have preferred it if you-can-easily-guess-what had not happened. But then I suppose it would have been just a boring old novel, not the feast of horror implied by the cover.

And I still can't see why they didn't just drive to the nearest police station.

The Unwilling Warlord by Lawrence Watt-Evans (Grafton, £3.99) is a much gentler affair, telling of a young native of one of those decadent cities in which fantasy abounds, who

is revealed as a descendant member of the royal family of a tiny kingdom (about 12 miles across) in what he considers the middle of nowhere and is forced to defend his new home against invasion by its not very much bigger neighbours. He turns to various mercenary magicians and wizards to do the job for him, causing no end of disruption to the lifestyle of his country cousins.

The job demarcations of the magic users read as if they were set up for a role-playing game, there are no plot surprises at all, and the whole thing has a sort of pleasantly predictable inconsequentiality that enabled me to read the book in a couple of enjoyable after-midnight hours.

Margaret Ball is also an author of romances, and there is a love story running through *Flameweaver* (Baen, \$4.99). The ancient nation of Gandhara has retreated into a hidden city in the mountains (as far as I can gather it's in roughly the area where modern Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sinkiang and Tadzhikistan don't quite meet.) In order to defend the city from the Russians, Tamai, a not very successful witch, is sent south into India to buy some Martini-Henry rifles. She finds herself in the heart of the British advance to the North-West frontier. Realizing that the mountains will never be able to stand against the outside world for long – the threat is not so much the foreign armies as the telegraph and the railway – Tamai attempts to make a treaty with the British, aided by the wife of an officer supposedly lost in action and a young journalist called Rudyard Kipling. *Flameweaver* is a delightful little book with a happy ending. Every quest should have one.

The genre miscegenation continues in *The Silver Branch* by Patricia Kennealy ("The First Book of the Keltiad"; Grafton, £4.99). In this case the genres are space opera, heroic fantasy, romance, and pseudo-Druidical matriarchal New Age waffle.

The descendants of the ancient Irish heroes fled into space to escape Christian persecution, during what we would call the middle ages, and established a Keltic empire as part of a wider galactic civilization. *The Silver Branch* is yet another Cyropedia, set in the 35th century, the story of the ancestry, birth, childhood, fostering and education (druidical, legal and military) of the Princess Aeron, fated to become High Queen (or rather "Ard-Rian" – the book is peppered with bits of Gaelic) of Keltia. Much of the text is taken up with meditation, martial arts, initiation rites and the setting and breaking of geas. (If that's the plural: Geis? Geasa? Geisa?) At the end Aeron has succeeded to the throne and awaits

whatever the next volume will bring. As the Kelts are deeply divided over the question of re-establishing contact with Earth, and Keltia once again at war with their ancient enemies the Fomorians (with whom Aeron has both a personal and a family feud), I strongly suspect a military setback, resolved by a reconciliation with either the Fomorian royal family or us Earthlings.

The Silver Branch comes complete with the full fantasy trilogy apparatus of maps, family trees, historical summaries, glossaries and Notes on Pronunciation. I'm a sucker for this sort of stuff. It revived my half-hearted desire to learn some Gaelic (by chance I read some of the book sitting in a pub next to two men having an animated discussion in that very language, reinforcing my impression that its most common expletive is the F-word that you are now allowed to use on the BBC). I thought I'd caught the author out in a couple of anachronisms – she uses some Scots words (like "Airts") which surely date from after the migrations; and her history has the galactic Arthur, recapitulating in detail the matter of earthly legends he ought to have been able to read. However, the author confesses to this sort of liberty in the appendices and quotes Humpty Dumpty in her defence so who am I to complain?

Best of the bunch this month is *Illusion* by Paula Volsky (Gollancz, £8.99) – and that's for a paperback: this is a big book). The ancient régime kingdom of Vonahr is held together by an effete aristocracy with some vague magical powers. Eliste, a provincial young noblewoman, in the capital to be presented at court, witnesses a revolution whose course is so much that of France that I suspect this book of being inspired by the bicentennial celebrations of a couple of years ago.

I know comparisons are meant to be odious but it's too late to stop now. Some things about this book – the size and complexity of the urban setting, the dark, if not demonic, powers that seem to be just around the corner – are reminiscent of Mary Gentle's *Rats and Gargoyles*, but the overall effect is light-hearted and civilized, like nothing so much as vintage Jack Vance. I wanted to get to the end. This is one of those books you read while walking around the house and bumping into things.

(Ken Brown)

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Conspiracy Theory

Jones & McIntosh

All right. Let's come clean from the start and admit that we weren't exactly straining at the leash to get our hands on an advance copy of *The Weerde* (Roc, £4.99). It's the second original shared-world anthology to come from the Midnight Rose group – the first was the lacklustre *Temps* (reviewed in IZ 55) – and frankly, having been once bitten, our expectations weren't high. But, although *The Weerde* is by no means an unqualified success, it is a more rewarding book than *Temps*. Why? Well, first off, there's the premise: We are not alone. There are others, not human, who share our world and stalk the highways and byways of our history, an ancient conspiracy who call themselves the Weerde. They are of course everything we'd rather they weren't – powerful, dangerous, elusive, often unfathomable, and they can shapeshift, too. Two of the "devisers," Neil Gaiman and Roz Kaveney, top and tail the anthology with colour text that details the mysterious Library of the Conspiracy, hints at the sinister reach of the Weerde, and generally whets our appetite.

Now this may not be totally original, but there is certainly the whiff of potential here. Of course, on the face of it, potential was also implicit in the *Temps* scenario. But with *Temps*, the writers were required to keep their tongue in (or at least in range of) their cheek, which did not, automatically, make anything funny. Here though you get the feeling that the authors have been encouraged to take this conspiracy seriously, and it's an approach which pays off.

To a degree. Reading some of the stories is, unfortunately, rather like a vacation spent with kind but tedious relations: you're so much aware of the effort they've put in that you feel bad about not being able to say you enjoyed the experience. For instance, with "Rain" by Christopher Amies there's a sense of painstaking work in the way the Spanish locations come so authentically across, but that's not enough to make it an engaging story. Ditto Liz Holliday's "Blind Fate," which does the same for ancient Greece and its mythology, Paul Cornell's "Sunflower Pump," a cocktail of alienated youth-culture and were-mythos, and Michael Fearn's rather aptly titled "Railway Mania," which is only a must if you've ever travelled on the Carlisle-to-Settle railway.

Then there are the practically compulsory contributions from the old lags of British sf. Colin Greenland's story is, as you'd expect, very well written, as well as being suitably sinister. "To the Bad" is a familiar Brian Stableford

narrative, acceptable enough although some of its details do appear to run counter to the background of the Weerde as presented elsewhere. Storm Constantine's story is painless and user-friendly, while Josephine Saxton's is considerably harder work, but both take a rather long time to cover a small amount of ground. Rising technogoth Charles Stross gives the conspiracy theory full throttle in his readable "Ancient of Days."

But two stories stand out, and interestingly they come from the two editors, Roz Kaveney and Mary Gentle. Kaveney's "A Wolf to Man" is set along the TransSiberian railway amid the turmoil of the Russian revolution (the 1917 one, not last year's) and its compelling authenticity helps to make it a strong read. Even better is Mary Gentle's "What God Abandoned." She, like Kaveney, has gone straight for the heart of the concept: shape-shifters intimately entwined with human history. Set when Prague is under siege (by amongst others the young René Descartes), it's a rich, complex, story, playing off sex-shifting against arcane magic, and it's as good if not better than anything you're likely to find in the magazines.

In the end though *The Weerde* is only a five-out-of-ten anthology and that's because, one (in fact, both of us) suspects, the editors haven't fully succeeded in communicating what they want to the rest of the gang. While their stories give tantalizing glimpses of the Weerde and their place in human history, alongside them many of the other contributions seem anticlimactic. In retrospect the Greenland, for instance, with its minimal references to the aliens amongst us, might have worked to better advantage as the lead story in place of the Kaveney. Still, assuming both that there is a Weerde 2 and that the Gentle and Kaveney are used as benchmarks for the future, it may be worth sticking with this series to find out what they come up with. Stay tuned.

(Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh)

Ikeworld

Neil Jones

"Dr Isaac Asimov's Positronic Answering Service. Please call me R. Ike."

"Hello, R. Ike. This is Grafton Books Positronic Publishing."

"Well hello, Graftie. And let me say right off what a really attractive voice circuit you have there. Now, what can I do for you, sweetheart?"

"Well R. Ike, it's about Doctor Asimov's new anthology. The one we're going to publish here in England."

"England, huh? Well that explains the cute accent. But which anthology

are we talking about, honey? The Doc's got a zillion and a half on the stands already."

"Isaac Asimov's Universe edited by Martin H. Greenberg (Grafton, £3.99). It's a brand-new Isaac Asimov universe, devised by him personally. He didn't actually write a story set in it himself, but lots of other well-known sf writers did."

"Hmm. Still can't place it. Hit me some more."

"It's in the far future, a thousand years at least, and there are six star-travelling species: the dolphin-types and the winged-types and the snakes-with-fold-away-hands, and the sort-of-slabby-ones-without-any-hands-at-all. Oh, and the usual big-insect-types."

"You said six."

"Did I? Oh yes. And humans, of course. They're the Johnny-come-recentlys as far as star-travel is concerned. None of the six want the same sort of planet so there aren't any wars or anything, but when they do interact they don't get along that well because they're all, well you know, alien."

"OK. So there are these six races. Is that it?"

"No. The lead story builds to a major revelation – and that's at the core of the whole book. Once upon a time, long long ago, there was a seventh alien race. They've vanished, but they've left lots and lots of ultra-high-tech artefacts all over the galaxy."

"Yeah, I remember now. I thought the Doc called it *Isaac's Universe*."

"He did, but we've retitled it for the UK market. We put the Asimov in too, just in case. Maximize the audience recognition, you know. Plus we Brits are rather more formal than you Americans, R. Ike."

"You're damn right, sweetie. Because anyone with a voice as gorgeous as yours absolutely has to start calling me just plain Ike this deep into a conversation. Now about the title-shift – no problemo, except for one tiny detail. As I recall, the Doc made a medium-sized thing in his intro about how it was Isaac's universe. Said he'd used Asimov, and Isaac Asimov, but never just Isaac ever before...and so on. So how about you put some sort of footnote in there just to explain –"

"There's no need, Ike. I'm sure the Great British Public won't notice. Our own people didn't."

"Well OK, it's your side of the Big Bathtub, Graftie. And after all it's the stories that signify, right? And there're some truly fantastico ones in that collection."

"Really? Which ones?"

"Hey, you did read the book, didn't you, Graftie?"

"I positronically glanced at it. Reading's not my department."

"Let me tell you the Doc let some real A-star wordsmiths loose on that universe."

"Oh yes, it's a really marvellous team of contributors. Very impressive indeed. One of the reasons we were so keen to publish it. In fact —"

"The Awesome Bobbie Silverberg himself did the lead story!"

"Oh yes, lovely writing. Super stuff. Deceptively dull for the first 50 pages or so and just when you're nodding off up pops that mysterious alien thingy right at the end. Oh, and I found that meditation on organic chemistry in deep space really elegiac."

"Right on, sister. And the Shekley was real hot, too. Maybe his prose isn't quite as classy as Silverberg's but his story was even longer. The guy can sure clock up the wordage when he puts his pen to it. Who else do we have in that one? Yeah, that Harry Turtle-dove guy."

"Yes. Didn't Dr Asimov expressly stipulate that there were just the six intelligent species in that introduction of his?"

"Sure he did. That was the whole concept."

"So I just wondered why Mr Turtle-dove saw fit to throw in two more. Otherwise his story is a perfectly acceptable trek-across-a-strange-planet-to-mysterious-alien-artefacts story. But his planet just happened to have an extra two alien races on it. That might be a little confusing for our target audience. It certainly confused me."

"No need to worry your pretty little positronic head over a little concept latitude, Graftie. Uncle Ike can clarify. Think back. Neither of Turtledove's aliens had starships, right?"

"I see. Well I'm glad you cleared that up."

"And what about, little Davy Brin, our new-generation megastar? His story 'The Diplomacy Guild' is the subtitle for volume one — and ideas-wise it's leader of the pack."

"That's true. And I'm sure he'll really do something with those ideas later on in the series. In fact, that's what I was —"

"— And, Graftie, the Brin story had robots."

"Why yes, very Asimovian. They were self-replicating robots too."

"Honey, I love it when broads talk dirty to me over the phone, especially when they've got voices as sexy as yours, but what say we get business out of the way first? Now the last story, the Poul Anderson — we were worried about that one, I admit."

"Really? But why? I thought that was by far the best. I mean, it had an interesting plot, and reasonable characterization and some intriguing physics and —"

"I know, I know, it just didn't fit. But at least it was long. So, what the heck? We decided we could live with it. Now, cards on the table, sweet lips — maybe a full house of alien races isn't a giga-unique concept for a shared-

world anthology series, and the stories are mostly slumberside up. But face it, we both of us know that the people who pay over their pesos for this baby are going to finish it with smiles on their faces. It's got guaranteed reader satisfaction. So, level with me — if the book didn't get you hot, how come you're calling transatlantic?"

"Well Ike, we understand the series is already as far as volume 3 over in the US —"

"And selling like, forgive me, there's no tomorrow™."

"— so we'd like to contract for all the other volumes in the series."

"Graftie, baby! Now we're running the same program! How's about you fax your little positronic ass Stateside prontissimo and let's the two of us do lunch..."

(Neil Jones)

UK Books Received

February 1992

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Auel, Jean M. **The Plains of Passage**. Hodder/Coronet, ISBN 0-340-54742-1, 975pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf/prehistoric romance, first published in the USA, 1990; fourth in the "Earth's Children" series; it "has already sold a staggering 1,600,000 hardback copies in America," according to the accompanying publicity letter; the mind boggles.) 19th March 1992.

Baldick, Chris, ed. **The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales**. Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-214194-5, 533pp, hardcover, £16.95. (Horror/supernatural anthology, first edition; contains stories by Edgar Allan Poe, Sheridan Le Fanu, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and many others through to Angela Carter, Joyce Carol Oates, Patrick McGrath and Isabel Allende; there's a good introduction by Baldick which defines "Gothic" in distinction to the "ghost story"; these rich anthologies of fantastic writing have been fairly tumbling from OUP's presses in recent years and months, presumably as a result of the untiring work of their resident fiction editor Michael Cox [himself a ghost-story anthropologist]; long may they continue, and isn't it time someone compiled *The Oxford Book of Science Fiction*?) 5th March 1992.

Banks, Iain. **The Crow Road**. Macdonald/Scribners, ISBN 0-356-20652-1, 496pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Non-sf novel by an author who has written much sf and fantasy; first edition; proof copy received.) 9th April 1992.

Barrett, Neal, Jr. **Dawn's Uncertain Light**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21274-4, 252pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1989; sequel to *Through Darkest America*.) 12th March 1992.

Bear, Greg. **Strength of Stones**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-04090-4, 221pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the

USA, 1981; second VGSF mass-market paperback printing.) 5th March 1992.

Black, Campbell. **The Piper**. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0899-0, 343pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1986; Black also writes successful thrillers as "Campbell Armstrong.") 5th March 1992.

Brooks, Terry. **Hook**. "Based on a Screenplay by Jim V. Hart and Malia Scotch Marmo, and Screen Story by Jim V. Hart and Nick Castle." Arrow, ISBN 0-09-911031-8, 211pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novelization, first published in the USA, 1991; this is the book of the latest Steven Spielberg film, and it is of course a sequel to *Peter Pan*; hidden away in the small print on the back cover is a credit for this myth's true creator: "Based upon the original stageplay and books written by J.M. Barrie.") 5th March 1992.

Carroll, Jonathan. **After Silence**. Macdonald, ISBN 0-356-20342-5, 240pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 2nd April 1992.

Carroll, Jonathan. **Outside the Dog Museum**. Futura, ISBN 0-7088-5247-5, 244pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 51.) 2nd April 1992.

Charnas, Suzy McKee. **The Vampire Tapestry**. Women's Press, ISBN 0-7043-4283-9, 285pp, paperback, £6.95. (Sf/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1980.) 26th March 1992.

Cherryh, C.J. **Yvgenie**. Methuen/Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0995-4, 280pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; third in the trilogy which began with *Rusalka* and *Chernevog*.) 5th March 1992.

Clarke, Arthur C. **Imperial Earth**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-04316-4, 287pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1975; second VGSF mass-market paperback printing.) 27th February 1992.

Collins, Warwick. **Death of an Angel**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31949-3, 418pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Near-future yachting thriller, first edition; third in the trilogy which began with *Challenge* and *New World*.) 20th March 1992.

Collins, Warwick. **New World**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31685-0, 432pp, paperback, £4.99. (Near-future yachting thriller, first published in 1991; second in the trilogy which began with *Challenge*; this edition contains a new two-page introduction in which the author apologizes for his predictions about the Soviet Union being overtaken by fact.) 20th March 1992.

Dalton, Annie. **The Afterdark Princess**. Illustrations by Kate Aldous. Mandarin/Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-0999-5, 115pp, paperback, £2.50. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1990.) 6th February 1992.

Dalton, Annie. **Swan Sister**. Methuen, ISBN 0-416-17982-7, 122pp, hardcover, £8.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; "another fairy tale for our times.") 10th February 1992.

De Lint, Charles. **Greenmantle**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31111-5, 328pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 48.) 7th February 1992.

De Lint, Charles. **Yarrow: An Autumn Tale**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31578-1, 244pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1986.) 7th February 1992.

Eddings, David. **The Sapphire Rose: The Elenium, Book Three**. HarperCollins/Graf-

ton, ISBN 0-586-21503-4, 525pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 55.) 12th March 1992.

Eisenstein, Phyllis. **Born to Exile**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13529-8, 172pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1978; it consists of a story-cycle about the adventures of Alaric the Minstrel, most of it first published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in the early-to-mid-1970s; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 19th March 1992.

Elton, Ben. **Gridlock**. Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-0568-9, 435pp, paperback, £4.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 53.) 5th March 1992.

Friedman, Michael Jan. **Reunion**. "Star Trek: The Next Generation." Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-74808-4, 343pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; this is the American first edition, third printing, with a UK price sticker.) 24th February 1992.

Gould, Stephen Jay. **Bully for Brontosaurus: Further Reflections in Natural History**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-015985-1, 540pp, paperback, £6.99. (Popular science essays, first published in the USA, 1991; the author is of course best known for his award-winning book *Wonderful Life*, and he has been described by one newspaper critic as "unquestionably the finest writer on science in English today.") 5th March 1992.

Gray, Serena. **The Alien's Survival Manual: An Outsider's Guide to the Planet Earth**. Futura, ISBN 0-7088-5326-9, 210pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous anecdote, first edition.) 27th February.

Green, Simon R. **Vengeance for a Lonely Man**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3789-1, 186pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; this appears to be the fourth in the fantasy/mystery series which began with *No Haven for the Guilty*.) 12th March 1992.

Gribbin, John. **Blinded by the Light**. "The secret life of the sun." Black Swan, ISBN 0-552-99423-5, 241pp, paperback, £5.99. (Popular science text, first published in 1991.) 19th March 1992.

Gribbin, John, and Marcus Chown. **Reunion**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05280-5, 285pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1991; sequel to *Double Planet*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 53.) 5th March 1992.

Harris, Robert. **Fatherland**. Hutchinson, ISBN 0-09-174827-5, 372pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Alternative-history sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a writer best known for his non-fiction books such as *Selling Hitler* and *Gotcha!*; set in a 1964 Berlin that never was, it's yet another "Nazis-won-World War II" story.) 7th May 1992.

Harrison, Harry, and Jack C. Haldeman II. **Bill, the Galactic Hero on the Planet of Zombie Vampires**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04982-0, 217pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; the fourth book in this "share-cropped" series based on Harrison's original 1965 novel *Bill, the Galactic Hero*, all packaged by the ubiquitous Byron Preiss.) 27th February 1992.

Heinlein, Robert A. **Stranger in a Strange Land**. "For the first time, the original uncut edition." Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-54742-6, 655pp, paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first

published in the USA, 1961; this expanded version first appeared in 1991.) 5th March 1992.

Hogan, James P. **Entoverse**. "A Giants Novel." Macdonald/Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-002-7, 488pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; a belated sequel to the "Giants" trilogy which began with Hogan's first novel, *Inherit the Stars* [1977].) 12th March 1992.

Hough, Peter, and Jenny Randles. **Looking for the Aliens: A Psychological, Imaginative and Scientific Investigation**. Blandford, ISBN 0-7137-2214-2, 241pp, trade paperback, £8.95. (Non-fiction study of alien contact; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; the book ranges from a consideration of science fiction, through UFOlogy to serious science such as the SETI project.) 19th March 1992.

Jones, Diana Wynne. **Archer's Goon**. Mandarin/Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-0909-X, 241pp, paperback, £3.50. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1984; this is a TV tie-in edition of what is now regarded as a classic kids' fantasy.) February 1992?

Koontz, Dean R. **The Key to Midnight**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0398-9, 311pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA under the pseudonym "Leigh Nichols," 1979.) 13th February 1992.

Laws, Stephen. **Darkfall**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-55674-3, 276pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition.) 5th March 1992.

Laymon, Richard. **Blood Games**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0454-3, 311pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first edition; Laymon is an American writer, but Headline appear to be publishing him first; reviewed by Ken Brown, this issue of *Interzone*.) 5th March 1992.

Laymon, Richard. **Darkness, Tell Us**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3665-8, 504pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1991.) 12th March 1992.

MacAvoy, R.A. **King of the Dead**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0466-7, 286pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; sequel to *Lens of the World*; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 54.) 13th February 1992.

MacAvoy, R.A. **Lens of the World**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3722-0, 286pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 54.) 20th February 1992.

McCaffrey, Anne. **All the Weyrs of Pern**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02225-4, 494pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1991; sequel to *The Renegades of Pern* in McCaffrey's lengthy "Dragon" series.) 19th March 1992.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Damia**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02374-9, 365pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; sequel to *The Rowan*.) 19th March 1992.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Pegasus in Flight**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13728-6, 318pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 49.) 19th March 1992.

McClure, Ken. **Requiem**. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-71761-8, 304pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Medical thriller, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as being "in the tradition of Robin Cook," so we assume it's at least marginally sf; McClure's first novel under this name was *Pestilence* [1991], but he had previously written four books under his real name, Ken Begg.) 27th April 1992.

McQuinn, Donald E. **Warrior**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-995880-5, 877pp, paperback, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 50.) 5th March 1992.

Murphy-Gibb, Dwina. **Cormac: The Seers**. "A magnificent evocation of Ireland's Celtic past." Pan, ISBN 0-330-32390-3, 328pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; it appears to be a debut novel, and the first of a trilogy; the author is married to Bee Gees singer Robin Gibb.) 6th March 1992.

Okrand, Marc. **The Klingon Dictionary: English/Klingon, Klingon/English**. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-74559-X, 191pp, trade paperback, £6.99. ("Star Trek" spinoff trivia book, first published in the USA, 1985 [?]; this is the American edition of January 1992 with a UK price sticker.) 24th February 1992.

Pratchett, Terry. **Small Gods**. "A Discworld Novel." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05222-8, 272pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the 13th "Discworld" book, or the 12th if one doesn't count the novella *Eric*.) March 1992.

Preiss, Byron, ed. **The Ultimate Dracula**. Introduction by Leonard Wolf. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3830-8, 372pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror anthology, first published in the USA, 1991; contains original stories on the Dracula theme by Philip José Farmer, Ed Gorman, Mike Resnick, Anne Rice, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Dan Simmons, Lawrence Watt-Evans and others; this is a lazily edited book: there are no notes on the authors [who are Ron Dee, Heather Graham, etc – first-timers?], the filmography at the back is disordered and skimpy, and there's no explanation as to who introduction-writer Leonard Wolf is – presumably not the late Virginia Woolf's late husband misspelled.) 20th February 1992.

Reeves-Stevens, Garfield. **Dark Matter**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31975-2, 393pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 7th February 1992.

Ryan, Charles. **The Capricorn Quadrant**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-55451-1, 374pp, paperback, £4.99. (Near-future techno-thriller, first published in the USA, 1990; it appears to be as out-of-date as most of its Cold War genre: "Soviet stealth technology, artificial intelligence and cold fusion beam weaponry interacted in an ultra-high level, anti-satellite plane years in advance of any US project.") 5th March 1992.

Stableford, Brian. **The Werewolves of London**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32267-2, 467pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 43.) 6th March 1992.

Strieber, Whitley. **Billy**. Futura, ISBN 0-7088-4901-6, 317pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 12th March 1992.

Strieber, Whitley. **Unholy Fire**. Macdonald, ISBN 0-356-20333-6, 375pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992; we listed the proof copy of this in *IZ* 58 – because of Macdonald's recent difficulties caused by the misdeeds of the late Robert Maxwell, publication was delayed a fortnight.) 27th February 1992.

Swithin, Antony. **The Winds of the Wastelands: The Perilous Quest for Lyonesse, Book Three**. HarperCollins/Fontana, ISBN 0-00-617940-1, 289pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 12th March 1992.

Taylor, Roger. **Dream Finder**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3726-3, 595pp, paperback,

£5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 54.) 12th March 1992.

Tennant, Emma. **Faustine**. Faber & Faber, ISBN 0-571-14263-X, 140pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; according to the blurb, it's a "clever, modern-day reworking of the Faust legend.") 9th March 1992.

Watson, Ian. **Stalin's Teardrops**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05281-3, 270pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in 1991; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 53.) 5th March 1992.

Weis, Margaret. **King's Sacrifice: Star of the Guardians, Volume Three**. Bantam, ISBN 0-552-40276-5, 519pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 19th March 1992.

Overseas Books Received

Agins, Phyllis Carol. **Suisan**. Baen, ISBN 0-671-72112-7, 241pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it appears to be a rewrite of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.") March 1992.

Anthony, Piers, and Robert E. Margroff. **Mouvar's Magic**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85305-X, 310pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the fifth and last book in the series which began with *Dragon's Gold*.) August 1992.

Bishop, Michael. **Count Geiger's Blues: A Comedy**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85199-5, 374pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; according to David Hartwell's accompanying publicity letter, this is "a witty and profound novel of everyday life and the fantastic, a book about life, art, heroism, and what fun it is to wear a cape and thwart evil-doers"; hmmm...) July 1992.

Brust, Steven, and Megan Lindholm. **Gypsy**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85274-6, 258pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; Terri Windling describes it in an accompanying publicity letter as "a gorgeous, myth-saturated novel of fantasy noir.") July 1992.

Campbell, Ramsey. **The Count of Eleven**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85350-5, 310pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1991; proof copy received.) June 1992.

De Lint, Charles. **Spiritwalk**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85204-5, 366pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *Moonheart*; apparently, the previous novel [from 1984] is now "a cult classic among fantasy readers and the New Age audience.") May 1992.

Dickson, Gordon R. **Young Bleys**. "The sequel to *The Final Encyclopedia*." Tor, ISBN 0-812-50947-1, 438pp, paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first published, 1991.) February 1992.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **Modern Classics of Science Fiction**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-07238-4, 672pp, hardcover, \$27.50. (Sf anthology, first published in the UK as *The Legend Book of Science Fiction*, 1991; reviewed by Neil Jones in *Interzone* 55.) 7th February 1992.

Emshwiller, Carol. **Venus Rising**. Edgewood Press [PO Box 264, Cambridge, MA 02238, USA], ISBN 0-9629066-0-3, 36pp, paperback, \$5. (Sf novella, first edition; on the title page, it states that it's "based on *The Aquatic Ape* and *The Descent of Woman* by Elaine Morgan.") February 1992?

Forward, Robert L. **Timemaster**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85214-2, 277pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) June 1992.

Gear, W. Michael, and Kathleen O'Neal Gear. **People of the Earth**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-50742-8, 587pp, paperback, \$5.99. (Prehistoric romance, first edition; it's the third in a series about early Amerindians which began with *People of the Wolf* and *People of the Fire*; when you look at the sales figures achieved by Jean M. Auel [see above] you can appreciate why publishers are keen to put so many of these books on the market.) 1st February 1992.

Gould, Steven. **Jumper**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85272-X, 344pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut book by an Analog writer who should not be confused with scientist Stephen Jay Gould of *Wonderful Life* and *Bully for Brontosaurus* fame [see above].) August 1992.

Lumley, Brian. **Demogorgon**. "Horror - from the mouth of Hell!" Tor, ISBN 0-812-51199-9, 345pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1987.) February 1992.

Mixon, Laura J. **Glass Houses**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-51918-3, 216pp, paperback, \$3.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut book about virtual reality,

described by George R.R. Martin as "cyberpunk with a heart.") May 1992.

Norton, Andre, and A.C. Crispin. **Songsmith: A Witch World Novel**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85123-5, 295pp, hardcover, \$17.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; these days Norton writes her *Witch World* books in collaboration - yet another example of "sharecropping.") May 1992.

Pasechnick, Stephen, and Brian Youmans, eds. **The Best of the Rest, 1990**. "The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy from the Small Press." Edgewood Press [PO Box 264, Cambridge, MA 02238, USA], ISBN 0-9629066-1-1, 113pp, paperback, \$8. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; contains stories by Terry Dowling, Carol Emshwiller, Garry Kilworth, Ellen Kushner, R.A. Lafferty, George Turner and others, reprinted from low-circulation magazines such as *Aurealis*, *BBR*, *On Spec* and *Strange Plasma*; it's admirably international in flavour.) Late entry: 1991 publication, received in February 1992.

Petrey, Susan. **Gifts of Blood**. Introduction by Debbie Cross and Paul M. Wrigley. Baen, ISBN 0-671-72107-0, 192pp, paperback, \$4.50. (Fantasy collection, first published in 1990; the author died at the tragically early age of 35, in 1980; most of these linked stories first appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* between 1979 and 1983.) February 1992.

Resnick, Mike, ed. **Alternate Presidents**. "From Benjamin Franklin to Michael Dukakis." Tor, ISBN 0-812-51192-1, 466pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Alternative-world sf anthology, first edition; contains new stories by Pat Cadigan, Jayce Carr, Jack L. Chalker, David Gerrold, Michael P. Kube-McDowell, Barry N. Malzberg, Judith Moffett, Kristine Katherine Rusch, Robert Sheckley, Susan Schwartz and others.) February 1992.

Sheffield, Charles. **Cold as Ice**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85139-1, 309pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) June 1992.

Thomas, Thomas T. **Crygender**. Baen, ISBN 0-671-72101-1, 316pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Sf novel, first edition.) Late entry: January 1992 publication, received in February.

Van Vogt, A.E. **The Book of Ptath**. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-88184-788-7, 159pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1947; originally published in shorter form in *Unknown* magazine in 1943.) February 1992?

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